

# B R O W N I N G

## BACKGROUND AND CONFLICT

F. R. G. Duckworth

with a Prefatory Word

*by*

WILLIAM LYON PHELPS



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BROWNING, BACKGROUND AND CONFLICT  
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FIRST EDITION

To  
L. R. F.

*Χάλκεα χρυσείων*





## Prefatory Word to the American Edition

By WILLIAM LYON PHELPS

AS the poetry of Browning was popular in the United States before it received anything like its due recognition in England, so it is true today that Browning has more enthusiastic readers and certainly more students in America than in Great Britain. He is studied by thousands of university undergraduates and boys and girls in the secondary schools.

A year ago I asked members of my class in Browning at Yale to bring to me any allusions to him or his works that they ran across in contemporary newspapers, magazines, and books; in two or three weeks I had to announce a moratorium, as I was flooded by the material they brought in.

Virginia Woolf, in an amusing article on Mrs. Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, intimates that owing to the popularity of Rudolf Besier's play, *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*, which is at this moment in its prosperous second year at the theatres in both London and New York, many more people are now familiar with the individuals Robert and Elizabeth Browning than they are with Browning's poetry. Well, in America there are hundreds of thousands of readers of Browning who have not yet had the opportunity to travel to New York, and successfully invade the Empire Theatre.

Mr. Duckworth's book is a serious, thoughtful, original study of Browning's genius, of his methods of composition, of his aims and ideals, of the growth of his reputation, of the peculiar appeal he made to men and women during the various decades of the nineteenth century. It is also an impartial and dispassionate examination into the kind of significance his poetry may have for us today.

With reference to the secondary title, *Background and Conflict*, which expresses not only the thesis of this work, but the reasons that induced Mr. Duckworth to write it, I prefer to make no comment, because I wish readers to reflect upon this themselves, without any previous suggestion. As to the source of Browning's poem *Christmas Eve*, which I pointed out in *Modern Language Notes* some twenty years ago, my belief in its relation to Browning's "orthodoxy" is somewhat different from that expressed by Mr. Duckworth.

Here at all events is a new book on Browning, bristling with ideas.

Yale University

11 November, 1931.

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## INTRODUCTION

**F**OR nearly seventy years men quarrelled fiercely over Browning's poetry. Even to-day, a century after the publication of *Pauline*, though the flames of controversy have died down, the embers are still warm. Not many poets have been so violently quarrelled over for so long. There must be in his verse something more than usually vital, something, that is, more than usually capable of arousing a live interest in widely varying conditions of thought and taste.

When I considered this, it seemed to me a task worth embarking upon to inquire more particularly what kind of interest was in fact aroused by Browning in strongly contrasted situations. I selected for the purpose three periods, namely, the years 1850-59, 1890-99 and 1920-29, and searched out what had been said of him in each of these. The results are embodied in the first part of the present book.

The general level of criticism in these three decades varies in point of intelligence and insight. The reviews and articles published during the Fifties are nearly always stupid and often ill-natured as well, and it might not have been worth paying attention to them but for the following reason. After carefully examining the critical attitudes of the Fifties and the Nineties, I was struck by this, that in each decade the critics had tended, in different degrees, to be blind to those very qualities in Browning's poetry on which they might have been

expected to dwell with the most insistence. Whether the same tendency exhibited itself also in the decade 1920-29 it was less easy to say for certain, but on the whole there appeared to be a fair amount of evidence that it was so. On grounds of completeness, then, and of contrast, it seemed that the inclusion of the decade 1850-59 was justified, even though the standard of criticism at that time was so low.

The decade 1920-29 was so engrossed with the fact that Browning was in many ways a typical Victorian poet that it had little thought to spare for anything but his Victorianisms. And yet there appeared to be in this poet's life and work a problem which of all others might have been expected most to interest this age, because it is a psychological problem arising out of a conflict in his personality and his poetry. It is with this conflict that the second part of this book is concerned.

Such is the main aim of the present book. If by the way it should suggest to some readers that Browning in his person and in his poetry was more interesting than they had realised, or that, although he is generally considered in our own day to be a Victorian of the Victorians, there are in his work certain elements of a surprising modernity—that will be all to the good. But to evaluate Browning's poetry, to show how he stands related to other poets before or after him, falling short of them in this, completing or forwarding them in that—or, still more inspiring and more difficult, to make us understand and feel how there throbs in his work, full here and more feeble there, the authentic and eternal rhythm of life, that is a task to which I have not dared to aspire in this book.

F. R. G. D.

PART I

*BACKGROUND*





## CHAPTER I

### *THE POINT AT ISSUE*

NOT a vast amount of humour is to be extracted from the Papers of the Browning Society of London, but one passage at least, occurring in the minutes of the twenty-second meeting of the Society, may still raise a smile. There it is recorded that, after a paper on "Some Prominent Points in Browning's Teaching" by Mr. W. A. Raleigh of University College had been read to the Society, the subject was thrown open to discussion. Thereupon arose one of the members, who suggested that the Society would obtain far greater benefit "if they left off discussing and went home and read their Browning." That member of the Browning Society was a certain Mr. G. B. Shaw.

On a first impulse one might say that no wiser advice was ever offered to the Society. But as one thinks over the matter a little further and perhaps more charitably, another reflection comes—how exceedingly difficult it was for the Society to read their Browning. And then again—not only for the Society but for anyone, in this day just as much as in that. It is not so much that Browning is obscure by reason of his language and his involutions of thought. Indeed, it is not only Browning who is difficult to read: it is every poet and every writer.

For, what happens to us, when we go home and try to read our Browning? What exactly have we in mind when we speak of reading a poem? Much,

obviously, beyond the mere deciphering of words. Thoughts and emotions are conveyed to us, we say, and the sum of these constitutes the poem's meaning or message or signal. In much of what is said or written about poetry it is assumed that this meaning is one and definite. Given two readers equal in intelligence and, roughly speaking, alike in upbringing, the poem, we think, ought to have very much the same effect upon both of them—should produce in both the same set of thoughts and emotions. It is because of this assumption that men are angry with those contemporaries of great poets who did not understand and value them as we do. We think that those contemporaries were perversely and wilfully blind, that they took no trouble to open their eyes and their ears. If they had been honest and persistent, they would have seen, heard and felt the same things as we who read the poet now.

But what if our assumption is not justified? Notice that, if we are pressed, we shall admit easily enough that readers, though they may be equal in intelligence, may differ in other ways—in degree of sensibility, for instance. Again, in the particular mental images evoked by a poem there will certainly be variations. “*Et rose elle a vécu ce que vivent les roses*”—when you read this, do you see white roses or red? All these differences, however, may appear to be relatively unimportant and quite insufficient to account for the perversity of perverse critics or to justify the members of the Browning Society in continuing their discussions.

But once any man has sat down with a trusted friend to compare notes honestly and candidly about any one poem which each has read independently—particularly if it be about some new or some un-

known poem whose author's reputation has not yet been appraised and fixed—then he will never again be able to feel so sure that all men of equal intelligence and like nurture must have moved in them the same thoughts and passions by the same poem. If it is for any reason difficult to test the truth of the statement, then recourse may be had to a book which has recently aroused much attention—Mr. I. A. Richards's *Practical Criticism*—in which many such experiments are described. And here and now an experiment carried out by the present writer somewhat on the same lines as those followed by Mr. I. A. Richards may be alluded to quite briefly. The persons who collaborated were not undergraduates (like Mr. Richards's collaborators), but mature persons. They were asked to read Browning's poem *The Flower's Name* (the first of the *Garden Fancies*)—but the title and the name of the author were withheld. After reading this, the next step was not to write a general appreciation of the poem, but to answer certain definite questions.

Of the forty persons who took part in this, thirty-five either had not read or forgot that they had read the poem. All of them were fairly familiar with Browning's better-known work, and all except one took pleasure in his poetry. They were men and women who in general terms would be called highly educated, and they could safely be taken as representative of an intelligent poetry-reading public. In recording their impressions they were entirely sincere and candid.

This is not the place in which to give a fully detailed account of the results of the investigation, but in summary form a very few of the more striking differences of impression may be recorded. Most of

the readers described the mood of the poem as sentimental: to some of these the sentimentality seemed gentle and inoffensive, to others it was wholly nauseating. Some interpreted the poem as the expression of a triumphant certainty, a cry of exultation; another group saw in it doubt and a kind of wistfulness. Again, of the many who remarked that it was a half-told tale, there were those who complained that the picture presented was shadowy and unsatisfactory—that the poet was negligent or uncertain of his aim, while others judged that the poem achieved a desired effect by means of suggestion.

Mr. Richards was not, of course, the first to observe the differences of impression and of judgment formed by men of about the same intelligence and nurture concerning one and the same poem, but he has been the first to study those differences seriously and systematically, to suggest a method of measuring them, as it were, and of explaining them by referring them to their causes. He himself, no doubt, and others with him and after him, will carry on to a further stage this investigation into the differences of judgment of individuals. But his work in this field suggests the existence of yet another field of inquiry—a study of the differences between characteristic opinions concerning a poet's work formed, not by individuals in one and the same moment of time, but by groups of men in different ages. True, such differences have already formed the object of study, in connection with Shakespeare or Milton, for example. To come a little nearer home to the subject of the present study, the changes in men's attitudes towards Tennyson are noted in Gwynne's well-known and widely read *Tennyson: a*

*Critical Study.* But a systematic attempt to seek for the explanation of these changes in the temper and the circumstances of the period in which each was formed does not appear to have been made.

Here a possible objection must be met. It may be argued that if fundamental differences are to be remarked in the judgments of individuals composing a group, it will be difficult to believe in the existence of a group judgment. And of a small group, of a group, for instance, of forty readers, such as that which read *The Flower's Name*, the objection must hold good. With very large numbers the case is quite different. Certain opinions and attitudes must then repeat themselves even in regard to one and the same poem. When not one poem is in question, but the significance and value of the whole of a poet's work or of a large portion of that work, the groups holding a similar opinion may be very large. To take a crude illustration, the two groups into which one might divide those who love Hardy's novels and those who hate them are obviously very large in comparison with the two groups of those who are drawn to him on account of his pessimism and of those who like him in spite of his pessimism.

To come now to the particular poet with whom this present study is concerned, everyone who has read him intelligently knows well that, after being neglected or held up to ridicule for the obscurity and harshness of his verse, he was later recognised as a supremely great poet, fitly to be named in the same breath with Shakespeare, while in our own day he has fallen from that high estate to the second class, as it were, and is esteemed one who, sometimes and within his class a supreme artist, can no longer be ranked with Shakespeare or even with Wordsworth

in the whole hierarchy of poets. But in all the very considerable literature which has sprung up around his name, no book is known to the present writer in which an attempt has been made to study some of the typical differences of judgment with a view to classifying them and referring them to their causes. Such an attempt is now to be made.

It is not intended to write a complete history, as it were, of the criticism of Browning. The study will be carried on within narrow limits. Three periods, or moments of time, have been chosen out, namely, the three decades 1850-59, 1890-99 and 1920-29. They have been selected, not so much because in each of them any one phase or stage of development in the criticism of Browning came by its completest or clearest or most characteristic expression. If that had been the main consideration, it would have been impossible to omit the period in which Walter Bagehot produced his essay on Wordsworth, Tennyson and Browning, or the years which saw the publication of works by G. K. Chesterton, Stopford Brooke and C. H. Herford.

The reasons for selecting the three periods named were these. In the first place, the three decades are widely different from each other in general characteristics. Secondly, they are widely different in respect of the esteem in which each of them held Browning's work. The decade of the Fifties is on the whole inimical to the poet, although with the publication of *Men and Women* in 1855 he reached what has come to be regarded by common consent as the highest point of his achievement. In the decade following upon his death, the Nineties, his reputation came to its zenith ; also this decade may be regarded as marking the close of the Victorian

period of poetry. Finally, in the Nineteen-twenties those who cared for poetry and took note how it grows and moves, seemed to become aware that a new stage in the history of poetry had opened ; also they felt (even those of them who had not succumbed to the wave of anti-Victorian prejudice) that Browning might now be considered *rangé*. And his rank was to be that of Matthew Arnold, Swinburne, Rossetti—quite definitely a rank below the very greatest masters.

Two further ways in which the study is limited must be mentioned quite briefly. Although, as has already been said, the different attitudes taken up towards Browning's work in each decade will be classified in some sort and the causes of them suggested, a complete analysis of the causes would be a task quite beyond the present writer's capacities. Since the influences at work in any moment to mould the judgments formed by a group of men are elusive and innumerable, attention will in each age be paid chiefly but not exclusively to the general tendencies of poetic thought—that is, the thought of poets and of critics of poetry. And lastly, the inquiry will relate exclusively to the poet's English critics (with the exception of Professor Irving Babbitt).

## CHAPTER II

### *THE EIGHTEEN-FIFTIES*

THE Fifties and Sixties were, it is generally assumed, the golden years of the Victorian era. "Victorian" is a word rather too easily and loosely used by critics of our own day, and many of the criticisms directed against the age could very easily be robbed of their sting merely by asking critics to define and justify their terms. The Victorian age has come to be associated in most people's thoughts with much that has been picked up from reading Dickens, Thackeray, George Eliot, Trollope, and from the illustrated journals of the time. We are apt to find ridiculous, or ugly, or both, its antimacassars, its horsehair and mahogany, its houses without bathrooms, its crinolines and its whiskers. Much more serious imputations are mental stuffiness, prudery, hypocrisy, a wilful blindness to devastating evils, a sort of moral insensibility. Standards of taste ranged low in a time that produced the Crystal Palace.

It is not necessary to fill more detail into the picture, nor need we here delay to ask whether the picture is fair. It would not even have been necessary to sketch it on this page if it were not that this is the background against which many of the present generation are accustomed to place the poetry of Tennyson and of Browning. Anyone who has not yet passed his thirtieth year and has seen in a theatre or a music hall actors in Victorian dress



dancing the polka has only then to be told that Tennyson of set purpose gave a polka rhythm to "Come into the garden, Maud . . ." for those lyrics to be at once and perhaps for always associated in his mind with something ridiculous and ungraceful.

This Victorian England was economically prosperous, and, so far as one may generalise on such a point, it believed in itself and believed that its achievements marked an immense progress upon anything known to past ages, and that this progress would continue irresistibly through the future. The tendency to materialistic standards in morals, art and religion is undeniable. Not that this attitude was universal. It was not everyone who believed that all was for the best in the Fifties. Although the Oxford movement had flickered out, leaving the Church almost unsinged, yet trouble was breeding among those many educated people who were acquainted with the speculations of Strauss and Renan. And though *The Origin of Species* was not published until 1859, yet *In Memoriam* bears witness of the doubts and fears to which, in many minds, Robert Chambers's *Vestiges of Creation* had given rise. In his preface to the 1853 volume of his poems, Matthew Arnold speaks of "the bewildering confusion of our times," and implies that the age was one of "spiritual discomfort." But though some few of the clearer-sighted were startled and alarmed by what they saw and read, it is clear that the majority of Englishmen were ready to be angered with any writer who depreciated the material prosperity of the time or cast its progress in doubt. In their view, the man of letters must accept it as his mission to forward the general deed of the time and to preach the doctrine according to Bentham.

Now let us ask what attitude the reading public of that day might be expected to take up towards Browning's poetry. Can any signs be discerned which might lead one to expect a favourable reception?

A few such signs there are. In the first place, there was being produced in this decade a mass of literature which has since vindicated its claim to greatness. And these works were enjoying considerable success, judging by the bookseller's balance sheets. In particular the fortunes of Tennyson might seem to justify bright hopes on Browning's account. For Tennyson, who had struck a new note in poetry and had previously been subjected to a stinging rebuke from the *Quarterly*, had now, with the publication of *In Memoriam*, established himself in popular favour. It is worth recalling that other successes of the decade were *David Copperfield*, *The Newcomes*, *Adam Bede*. Then again, not only had the literary reviews shown themselves favourably disposed towards Tennyson, Dickens, George Eliot, the Brontës, but also one can find in this or that number general critical pronouncements of such a sort as to suggest that a new writer might expect fair and judicious treatment. One reviewer expects poetry to enlarge its province and to become conversant with "whatsoever stands immediately and obviously in relation to universal truths and permanent humanity." Another shows that he is struggling to free himself from his own prejudices. For having said that *Lohengrin* reminded him of the wind whistling through the keyholes of a cathedral, he makes haste to add that this was merely a personal impression and to remind himself of the titters with which critics had greeted the first performance

of a Beethoven symphony at a Philharmonic concert.

But any hopes based upon such evidence of enlightened critical opinion would surely be illusory. The evidence is very slight, and even if there were none on the other side, no one could feel happy about Browning's chances of recognition, when he recalled the general tone and temper of that day. He might for instance ask himself—"If Tennyson was at that time recognised, on what grounds was that recognition accorded? Perhaps Tennyson succeeded in spite of his better qualities?" As it happens, the answer to that question can be supplied by anyone who has read an essay on Tennyson's poems written in 1855 by George Brimley, the Librarian of Trinity College, Cambridge. Brimley was a critic well above the average of his time in learning and in enlightenment. If he fails anywhere, we can reasonably suppose that on that side the great reading public, less enlightened than he, would fail still more conspicuously. Now, Brimley does fail. He criticises *Claribel*, because Tennyson does not linger on her gentle and affectionate nature, on her grace and beauty. He praises the 1842 volume, because it does not contain *Oenone*. ("Grecian nymphs no longer pour out their loves and griefs to their mother earth.") And he makes a general accusation that the poet's material lacks human interest. If Brimley was saying that in this way, then less kindly and less well-educated readers were saying it more strongly and more stupidly. They were pretty certainly gloating over *Dora* and *The Gardener's Daughter* and turning aside from *Oenone* and the *Lotus Eaters*, and the parts of *In Memoriam* which most certainly conciliated them to Tennyson

were the parts which proved that he really was an Englishman who had forgotten Mount Ida for the sake of the Lincolnshire wolds.

It was this sort of interpretation that we to-day must give to those articles in which the critics of the Fifties declared their readiness to welcome new great poets. If the *Edinburgh* said "the English public were never more eager to hail the productions of a literary genius," we must not forget that the *Spectator* had written, "the poet who would really fix the public attention must leave the exhausted past and draw his subjects from matters of present import." That quotation indeed appears in Matthew Arnold's preface to the 1853 poems, and that reminds us that Matthew Arnold had withdrawn the 1852 volume of poems from circulation before fifty copies had been sold, although it contained nearly all of his greatest poetry. The same sort of fate had attended the 1849 volume. This catastrophe could not but rouse our deepest apprehensions on Browning's behalf. The fact is, that the age said that it wished to get itself interpreted—and let it be known that only favourable interpretations would be accepted. If the business, the thoughts, the manner of everyday life were to be handled by the poet, it would be on condition that he avoided "the slightest jar of vulgarity and laughableness." New writers were expected to respect the Established Church at the risk of being thought and called irreverent. No more *Ingoldsby Legends*. And if any poet or critic should turn his attention to the paintings of the old masters, he must not on any account forget—as Ruskin had been guilty of forgetting—that "they were compelled occasionally to address themselves to superstition at the expense of taste." Of Ruskin's famous

pamphlet on the Royal Academy Exhibition of 1855 the *Quarterly* reviewer wrote that nothing could be more degradingly low.

Yet again, while great writers were praised on wrong grounds, equally they were blamed on wrong grounds. Dickens himself drew murmurs from his audience because he was perverting the minds of youth by presenting British institutions to them in an unfavourable light. The *Quarterly*, indeed, went so far as to describe him as a Pre-Raphaelite among novelists ; and though that may have been written in praise, it was undoubtedly accepted as a condemnation. Consider again the reception of *Maud*. It looked for a moment as though Tennyson had jeopardised his position. Had he not ascribed to the hero of the poem a passion that is " now and then the passion of a Southern woman rather than an English man ? Would an English man in earnest talk thus ? " Other critics spoke of the " diseased subjectivity " of the poem, and the *Irish Quarterly* said that the poet had approached the bounds which separate reason from idiocy. While some were in this way offended by the content of the poem, others had their teeth set on edge by the form of the verse and could not be reconciled to such lines as—

Now to the scream of a maddened beach dragged down by the  
wave.

Let us further recall how Elizabeth Barrett Browning, whom some thought a likely candidate for the Laureateship, scandalised all respectable women when she published *Aurora Leigh*. They called it a most improper book which no self-respecting person would leave about in the drawing-room.

One might, then, draw out a kind of *Ars Poetica* of

the Fifties. First, to consider the content of poetry the poet must not on any account fail to exhibit in his works a high degree of moral soundness, so that not only those who held to the true doctrine might be edified, but the ignorant and the sceptical might be turned towards the light. The darker side of life might be treated of, but always with a view to the working of some improvement in the social order. Thus Tennyson was justified in describing insanity in *Maud* only because that helped to draw attention to the fact that the lunatic asylums were full. And, as has already been remarked, there must be no attack upon characteristic British institutions.

Originality was a recognised attribute of great art, but mere novelty must be distinguished from true and legitimate originality. Thus it was the craze for novelty which alone could be held to account for the popularity of Ruskin with a certain section of the public. Finally, the slightest suspicion of anything like vulgarity, not to say ribaldry, would suffice to condemn without appeal.

As to the form of poetry, lucidity was one of the first requisites. And, indeed, said the critics, there *was* a curious belief abroad that a poem could not be profound unless it was obscure. Here was the blemish in *In Memoriam*; and that some reviewers found *Maud* incomprehensible we have already seen. Next to lucidity came finish. There must be unity and coherence in a poem as in all kinds of intellectual products. Even so accomplished a scholar and so conscientious a workman as Matthew Arnold was found on occasion slovenly in his versification. The noblest art was that which subjected itself to the severest discipline. And in this kind the standards had been defined and acknowledged.

Further than this it is not necessary to go. Enough has been said to show us what kind of a reception the Victorian Robert Browning might expect from his Victorian readers. Let us now take up one by one the points in this *Ars Poetica* and consider whether there is any single one upon which he would not be arraigned. The poet must preach sound morals—and here is Browning in the *Statue and the Bust* maintaining that adultery may be laudable! The *Christian Remembrancer* found much to condemn in him on this side. Did he not, in *Fra Lippo Lippi*, call upon his readers to sympathise with “that licentious monk artist . . . apologising with unctuous minuteness for his shameless course of life.” And in general, says the same review, “his pictures of love are coarse passion; his idea of beauty is sensual.” The *Quarterly*, in an article otherwise distinguished by good sense, showed some diffidence in advancing the opinion that in the *Grammarian’s Funeral* there was something grand and solemn.

And then Browning had chosen such odd and out-of-the-way subjects—the licentious monk, Fra Lippo Lippi; the bigot of the *Heretic’s Tragedy*; the shameless prelate in *Saint Praxed’s* (a poem which for sheer disgustingness could hardly be equalled), and obscure musicians, Baldassare Galuppi and Master Hugues, of Saxe-Gotha. Evidently Mr. Browning had little sympathy with the Anglican Church: Romanism was much more to his taste. Where, as in *Christmas Eve*, he concerned himself with the central mysteries of Christianity, the language was doggerel and the mood verged upon ribaldry. A sad lack of reverence in Mr. Browning. The *Athenæum*, which did not wholly condemn the poem and found in it a serious vein, likened it to a cathedral “where,

ever as we become absorbed in the anthem the doors are thrust open to jar us with the common traffic of the street." That same Hudibrastic versification, the symbol of a calculated impertinence, defiled *Men and Women* no less than the earlier volume.

And what of his treatment of British history and of British scenery? There was very little of either in these volumes. But *Cavalier Lyrics* were pronounced by one reviewer to be mere blackguardry. Why must the poet harp upon the failings of the cavaliers and roundheads and not be content to dwell upon such nobleness as they might have exhibited? And why could he not, like Tennyson, make his own country the background of his poems? Why not write poems like *Dora* or *The Gardener's Daughter*? Why must it be *Pippa Passes* rather than *Polly Passes*? asked the *Quarterly*. In this connection *Fraser's Magazine* has a passage which deserves to be quoted in full: "There are fine ballads in the second volume, healthy and English, clear of that Italianesque pedantry, that *crambe repetita* of olives and lizards, artists and monks, with which the English public, for its sins, has been spoon-fed for the last half-century, ever since Childe Harold in a luckless hour thought a warmer climate might make him a better man, and that the way to raise one's own spirit was to escape to a country where humanity has sunk below the beasts." Another critic speaks with a little more caution, but his words are scarcely less wounding: "The mode of thought, without being anti-English, constantly bears an indescribable savour of the Continent."

What the critics had to say about obscurity is hardly worth repeating. Two points may, indeed, be noticed. Fraser's reviewer found a word to say



in praise of *Sordello*—not condoning its obscurity, but lamenting that obscurity should have spoilt a noble conception. This was at a time when *Sordello* had been withdrawn by its author from the 1849 volume. Secondly, the poet's obscurity aroused something like real anger. For, that a poet could be at once obscure and a poet was impossible. Browning must be aware of that. If he was not aware of that, it was not for want of admonitions. Yet he persisted in being obscure. It was monstrous—really, Mr. Browning was too proud for anything. For it was not as if the things he had to say could not be said plainly. There was only one possible explanation: he hoped by being obscure to gain a reputation for profundity, just as by being eccentric he would persuade his readers that he was being original.

Likewise the faultiness of his versification proceeded from nothing less than sinful pride. He was too proud to use the crucible and the file, although it was obvious to any intelligent and educated man that the noblest art had always submitted itself willingly to the severest discipline. There was an utter absence in his verse of graceful grammatic flow. And the thought was confused and feeble: "It may seem odd to compare a man so reticent and clever with the weak and loquacious Mrs. Nickleby, but really his random style of address is not unlike that lady's." Random thoughts may sometimes perhaps please if they are expressed in melodious lines—example, "Where Claribel low lieth." But here was nonsense conveyed in harsh cacophonous lines which hardly submitted to be scanned.

The limitation of these reviews are obvious. But

they have not been exhibited here in order to show how low criticism had fallen in the period between *Biographia Litteraria* and *Essays in Criticism*. The object is to illustrate the preconceptions and prejudices which had to be overcome by the more intelligent of the public before they could place themselves in contact with a poet in his poetry. To overcome them was difficult enough in the case of Tennyson or Matthew Arnold; it was far more difficult in the case of Browning. And in order that the situation may be more fully illustrated from this standpoint, it is well to call to mind not only the grounds upon which Browning was being unintelligently blamed, but also the grounds upon which he was being unintelligently praised.

A ridiculous passage from *Fraser's Review* has already been quoted in which certain poems in the 1849 volume had been approved as "fine ballads, healthy and English" and "free from Italianesque pedantry." The same article, while made uneasy by the morbid atmosphere of *Porphyria's Lover*, considers that the poem is in some measure redeemed by its uncommon pathos. The grounds upon which the *Christian Remembrancer* praised *Any Wife to any Husband* were that, "read with the idea that they represent . . . the greater chance that widows abide in their loneliness than widowers," the poem becomes "not only clear but very beautiful and pathetic." The general tone of that article, in contrast to the savage onslaught delivered in a previous year in the same review, is mildly favourable, and finds in Browning "a votary of mysticism." This description appears to have been fairly common and meant no more than that the language and thought of Browning were hard to

grasp, and that the only sure way of grasping them was to assume that when the poet said one thing he meant something quite different. Thus *Any Wife to Any Husband* would never yield up its secret if the readers started with the assumption that the title had any reference to the subject-matter of the poem. As soon, however, as it was perceived that *Any Wife to Any Husband* really meant *The Chance of Widowers Abiding in their Loneliness*, then the whole significance of the poem leapt out full and clear, and was seen to be very beautiful and pathetic.

But, as might have been expected, it was *Christmas Eve* and *Easter Day* which most surely derailed his critics. *Christmas Eve* was an argument, said one reviewer, for the divinity of Christ; while another interpreted the same poem as a recommendation to humility and faith. *Fraser's Magazine* contains what is probably the most curious critical document on this subject. The writer confesses that on first reading the poems he had been disappointed. Mr. Browning was known to possess great poetic ability marred by defects which the critics had not failed to point out to him. Surely he would now mend his ways? Not a bit of it! Here were "the old levity and irreverence; the old coarse ungrateful quaintness . . . the old obscurity . . . all the old faults, in short, showing more ugly than ever beside the greater sublimity and the intrinsic sweetness with which they have chosen to meddle." And yet at the end of the article come these words: "Thus, step by step, we have passed on from dislike to palliation, from palliation to something like justification." What were these steps from dislike to palliation, from palliation to justification? There were, in fact, two steps. The first was taken when the ~~critic~~

bered that at a first reading of *The Princess* he had been stirred to something like anger ; and subsequent readings had convinced him that he was wrong and that *The Princess* was a fine performance. Then, having remembered how narrow a shave he had had with *The Princess*, the writer next remembers that he is a Christian, and that these poems of Browning are concerned with the profoundest issues of religion. There follows this passage. Speaking of Browning's love for the Christian faith, he says :

“ Is it for the critic in such a case to judge harshly or in love ? Must he not say to his own heart, ‘ Wilt thou not love one who loves Him, whom thou professest to love ? Take the message as coming NOT from the poet but from the poet's Lord ; and learn rather than judge : perhaps then thou wilt find reason to be more contented with the manner of the message ; to believe that thus, and not otherwise, it was projected upon the mirror of his brain, because thus, and no otherwise, he could have uttered it, thrown into it all his peculiar talents, all the force of his peculiar personality. . . . May not these very defects be signs of a higher calling than that of the glib-tongued multitude, whose rivulets can run smoothly because their channels are ready scooped and polished for them ? Which is better, he who polishes a doll or he who rough-hews a colossus ? ’ ”

Concerning the tone of this pronouncement it is only necessary to say that these are not the words of a wilfully dishonest man or of a man according to his own lights uncharitable, but they are a curious comment upon the blindness of his intelligence. Not only must he have been unaware of the real quality of the tone of this paragraph, but he did not

even see that to write it was to abnegate his office of critic. But Nemesis overtook him, for when it came, at the end of his article, to summing up the case and pronouncing a verdict, he can only say that he "remains in doubt what verdict to give, and somewhat glad that our verdict matters so little that it is not worth while giving."

By way of contrast and perhaps for the sake of being just to the men of that age we may turn from these obscure reviewers (but perhaps not the less representative for being obscure) to an intellect of the first order. Carlyle was a warm admirer of Browning—"one of the bravest and most gifted English souls now living" . . . "the finest poetic genius, finest possibility of such, we have got vouchsafed to us in this generation." On 25th April, 1856, Carlyle wrote to Browning acknowledging the present of *Men and Women*.

"My approval was hearty and spontaneous. . . . I shall look far, I believe, to find such a pair of eyes as I see there busy inspecting human life this long while—fresh, valiant, manful character, equipped with rugged humour, just love, just contempt, well carried and bestowed."

He goes on to speak of a genius worth cultivating, "worth sacrificing oneself to tame and subdue into perfection." And this brings him to "the shadow-side of the picture. My friend, it is what they call unintelligibility. That is a fact: you are dreadfully difficult to understand; and that is really a sin. Admit the fact." Then comes something which may astonish: "I do not at this point any longer forbid you *verse* as I probably once did." He ends up—and these words were written not so very long

before Browning began to think out *The Ring and the Book*—"If you took up some one *great* subject, and tasked all your powers upon it for a long while, vowing to Heaven that you would be plain to the meanest capacity, then——!"

Concerning Dante Gabriel Rossetti's opinions it will be more convenient to speak in the next chapter. There remain to be mentioned two other critics who stand apart from the crowd. Matthew Arnold had not published any criticism of his contemporary, but there is matter in his 1853 preface which could have been quoted both by the enemies of Browning and by his friends. In favour of Browning is a passage in which he insists with all his strength that it is no part of the business of poets to "inflate themselves with a belief in the pre-eminent greatness and importance of their own times. They do not talk of their mission, nor of interpreting their age, nor of the coming poet; all this, they know, is the mere delirium of vanity." On the other hand, the poet must select an excellent action and must achieve the "clearness of arrangement, rigour of development, simplicity of style" of the ancients. And on the whole there is little evidence that Arnold then or later returned the admiration which Browning lavished upon him, though it was in accordance with Browning's recommendation that he restored to the *New Poems* (in 1867) *Empedocles on Etna*, whose previous exclusion had provided the theme for the 1853 preface.<sup>1</sup>

The second name is Ruskin, who in the fourth volume of *Modern Painters* said: "Robert Browning

<sup>1</sup> It may be ominous that Arnold says of Mrs. Browning: "I regard her as hopelessly confirmed in her aberration from health, nature, beauty and truth."

is unerring in every sentence he writes about the Middle Ages, always vital, right and profound. . . . I know no other piece of modern English prose or poetry in which there is so much told, as in these lines, of the Renaissance spirit"—nor was it in serious dispraise that he spoke of "those seemingly careless and too rugged lines of his."<sup>1</sup>

When we come to summing up, we find that Browning's admirers in the Fifties were few, but that for the most part they included the greatest minds of his day and the keenest in literary insight. The great mass of people knew nothing of him: the public which read the reviews read in them nothing but condemnation of him; and one of the severest criticisms passed on him was that he did not appreciate the true worth of his own people and his own age. This ought always to be borne in mind by those—and they are not a few—who call Browning a typical Victorian. For if he was a Victorian, then we may say that he came to his own and his own received him not. But then it may be asked whether indeed he was a Victorian. The answer must be that, in the main, he was. We see now what so many of the Victorians of the Fifties did not see, that although he preferred Pippa to Polly, Tuscany and Fra Lippo Lippi to Surrey and Maclise, olives and Chianti to cheese and beer, yet underneath these superficial matters he had in him much that was characteristic of his age. For in spite of *The Statue and the Bust*, he most firmly and ardently believed in marriage as the true consummation of romantic love, and his moral code was the moral code of the Victorians in its essentials—interpreted, indeed, more intelligently and charitably than by most of the

<sup>1</sup> Browning's reply to Ruskin is discussed in Chapter IV, see pages 132, 133.

Victorians. He believed in the active life, he believed in progress and he was ardently patriotic. He did not like Bohemianism—he hated the circle of George Sand—and it is probably the *bon bourgeois* in him that in the end alienated Dante Gabriel Rossetti from him. For such reasons the general agreement among critics of to-day in pronouncing him a representative Victorian is on the whole correct ; or rather it is true of Browning in certain aspects. In other aspects, to which attention will be drawn in subsequent chapters, he was not a Victorian. But these aspects, like the Victorian aspect, passed almost wholly unnoticed by his critics in the Eighteen-fifties.



### CHAPTER III

### THE NINETIES

IN 1894 Max Beerbohm cried, "the Victorian era comes to an end." Not that anything final or decisive seems to have happened in that year, but the Nineties did tend to believe that one order of things had passed away and another had taken its place. It is certain that the Eighties had taken a heavy toll of the greater Victorians—Browning, Carlyle, Disraeli, George Eliot and Matthew Arnold ; and Tennyson died in 1892. It is very much less certain that anything which could properly be called a new order had taken their place. Whatever came next after the Victorian era may turn out not to have been an order at all, and certainly it was not new in 1894.

Matthew Arnold had described the early Fifties as a time of spiritual discomfort and an age of bewildering confusion. But if breezes were then disturbing the peace of the garden, they had in the Nineties swollen to the dimensions of a typhoon. To preserve the metaphor, it was *The Origin of Species* which first set the trees rocking violently. How the tempest unchained by these speculations swept with gathering force across the whole domain of thought has often enough been described. There was not in religion, in moral theory, in art, in politics, one single monumental opinion that could seem beyond doubt secure against these blasts. What, for instance, must now be held of man's place in the

universe? Was it any longer certain that he was the sum and crown of things? Was mind itself, perhaps, no more than a by-product—almost an accident? Evolutionary methods in general and scientific materialism in particular seemed to be cutting at the very bases of morals because the development of all things high and complex was now being traced from things rudimentary and ignoble, and because that very development was being represented as the work, not of a soul aspiring towards an ideal, but of external non-spiritual forces whose operations might eventually be reducible to a series of mathematical formulæ.

Such a picture of spiritual turmoil is very generally accepted as being true of the decade of the Nineties. But it must not too easily be accepted. The restlessness and the doubt were very roughly speaking in proportion to the intelligence and knowledge of those who felt them. The great majority of the upper middle class, that is to say, the class whose money kept authors and reviewers alive, were not in any great or grave doubt either about the right way of living this life or the right way of assessing poetry. They knew that the beliefs they held most sacred were being assailed, and they did feel some need of being strengthened. They felt like an innocent man conscious of his innocence, but needing a trained barrister—not to assure him of his innocence but to make it clear to others. Besides, there is one curious feature in the general situation which has on the whole tended to escape notice—and that is the kind of attitude which scientists at that time were taking up towards problems of social and individual conduct.

Science at this time was, in a certain sense, in a

condition of stagnation. The main laws governing the physical constitution of the universe were thought to have been discovered. What remained to be done was a huge enough task, but it would in truth be no more than the application of these formulated main laws to phase after phase of existence. And again, though by methods copied from biology, the evolution of institutions, moral codes, religious beliefs was being traced to muddy beginnings, though in that process the authority of religious and ethical systems had been undermined, and was thought by many to be tottering to a crash, yet the main scheme of motives likely to govern the conduct of individuals and communities was not gravely in doubt. The same hands which in the name of truth were overturning the old idols were ready to set them up again in the interests of biological—or sociological—continuity, so that it was hardly in contemplation that praise and blame would be very differently apportioned to this or that act or disposition or that a new hierarchy of virtues would be established. It is true that some few—a very few—were reading Ibsen and Tolstoy, and that even fewer had become aware of the existence of Nietzsche, and that Freud himself was lecturing in the Nineties. If an Englishman of the Nineties—a decent, respectable doctor or clergyman or schoolmaster—had been asked to name the most redoubtable rebel of the time, he would unhesitatingly have named Huxley. But Huxley's influence, outside the region of science proper, was wholly negative : in some ways it was not even negative. In the matter of a code of morals, or more generally in respect of the art of living, Huxley had nothing to offer which could reasonably be judged contrary to the precepts of the Established Church.

It is in this broad setting that the poetical thought of the Nineties must be placed. And in order to do that the more conveniently, it may be well to distinguish between two classes of opinions or attitudes—on the one hand, those of the more powerful and advanced minds, of men whose names remain with us because they seem to have opened up new paths ; and, on the other hand, those of the great mass of more or less educated critics and readers of poetry. This, in effect, is what we did in the case of the Eighteen-fifties, but in dealing with the Nineties the available material is so much richer and more complex that a separate chapter seems to be demanded for each class. The present chapter therefore will be confined to discussing the thoughts and the influence of a few men whom we consider characteristic of that age, the chapter next following will deal with that far larger aggregate which can only be described by such a vague phrase as “ the intelligent reading public.”

In the present chapter, then, an attempt will be made first, to suggest what forces were at work in bringing to birth new ideas of the function and value of poetry, and secondly, to deduce from these ideas a critique of Browning’s poetry (in other words to answer the question, “ What might men with such ideas be expected to think of Browning ? ”), and thirdly, to examine the critical estimates actually formed by the men who had given birth to these ideas (that is, to answer the question, “ What, in fact, did these men think of Browning ? ”).

The previous chapter spoke of the pride of Mid-Victorians in their material progress. They felt confident that the path in which they had set their feet must lead to prosperity and happiness for the whole community. Much had to be done, and there

was need of courage and perseverance, but the day was not far off when ignorance, poverty and vice would melt away from the face of the land. And the Nineties saw that it was not so. Especially did clear-eyed and sensitive young men see that it was not so. The fruits of disillusionment were various. Some—who earned the name of the Decadent *Æsthètes*<sup>1</sup>—turned their faces away from the ugly realities of life and tried to create for themselves an artificial paradise. Others, disgusted with all that had been achieved in the name of reason, looked in another direction for consolation—in a twilight where reason did not rule and dreams were truer and more life-giving than the hours of waking. Any tendency which men or groups of men exhibit to shut themselves away in their art from the general endeavour of their kind—to disown any preoccupation with problems of conduct or religion as such—would be strongly reinforced by the doctrine of “Art for Art’s sake,” which in the Eighties had been proclaimed by Whistler. His absurd suit for libel against Ruskin had delighted a younger generation, who felt sure that an æsthetic must be profoundly vicious which condemned Rembrandt for the immorality of his colouring. Up, they cried, with Japanese prints and Velasquez and down with Carpaccio and the guilds of stone-masons. The divorce of arts from morals was pronounced absolute. This, as we shall see in Chapter V, where reference is made to the theory of Poetry for Poetry’s sake, led to an overwhelming insistence on technique. The subject-matter of

<sup>1</sup> Whether there was ever anything which could properly be called a Decadent or Decadent *Æsthète* Movement (in the sense in which there was a Romantic Movement) is very doubtful. Yet it is certain that Wilde and Beardsley had a following, and that there was formed under such influences a body of ideas not easily to be measured or defined which for the sake of convenience may be called Decadent *Æsthète*.

poetry became a thing of little importance : it was the treatment which counted.

We have now to notice in the Nineties the existence of yet a third group, more robust and practical, preaching a new kind of realism. They summoned their friends to see the world as it was, stripped of sham ideals, and they called for immediate and strenuous action for the setting up of a new code. What is common to these three groups is a belief that their own generation either was not worth saving or could only be saved by painful sacrifices and a purgation of fire. But not all of the younger writers despaired of their generation. One at least, and he in some ways had the most influence upon the reading public, saw hope in the creation of a great Empire, and preached a curious mixture of realism and romanticism, of materialism and spiritualism. Finally, we discern another group—if they can be called a group—of thinkers not attaching themselves to any particular movement, but each going his own way. The influence of these men did not make itself fully felt in the Nineties.

It is important to consider each of these groups in a little detail, and that in the order in which they have just been named. The Decadents developed tendencies which can be traced back through Swinburne to the Pre-Raphaelites. From their inception, these tendencies swerved away from the main social tendencies of the age. The Pre-Raphaelites did not like, they detested, the industrial and commercial prosperity of the Fifties—the concernment with material ends, the conscious and self-confident break with the past, the excited straining towards a future in which aerial navies would grapple in the blue and all India's teeming

millions would go clad in Manchester cotton goods. From all this they swerved away ; and if they could not anywhere outside them and in the present find things that contented eye and ear, they sought them in other countries and in the past. Hence a certain exoticism in their poetry and that element in it which has not very happily been named mediævalism. The exoticism was special in the sense that these poets did at times surrender themselves more completely to the direct influence of foreign literatures. It was not only that they sought themes from abroad and laid the scenes of their poems in foreign countries, aiming at "local colour." That had often enough been done. It was that in a peculiar degree they tried to fit themselves to the temper of foreign writers and to borrow from them a part of their technique. This tendency, which they did not, indeed, carry very far, was to be continued and developed by Swinburne and carried to its extreme by the Decadents. With Swinburne and the Decadents the prevailing influence was a French influence. In Hugo and in Baudelaire Swinburne discerned attitudes towards which his own nature was spontaneously growing. He was encouraged to attempt a more absolute divorce between poetry and morals than the Pre-Raphaelites had effected, a completer dedication to vividness and intensity of sensation, a more conscientious resolve to leave nothing unexplored within the range of experience, and particularly within the entire range of the passions. Consequently he shocked the British public. It is not easy for us to imagine, at a distance of two generations, the veiled horror and the shrieks of protest with which the 1866 volume of *Poems and Ballads* was greeted by a public, many of whom were

still doubtful about the moral soundness of *The Statue and the Bust*, and only with an effort could stomach the "diseased subjectivity" of *Maud*.

The Decadents may be looked upon as the spiritual heirs of Swinburne. They went a step farther than he, and courted a catastrophe. Their influence tends, perhaps, to be a little underrated at this day. Certainly it cannot be said that they left no trace of themselves upon the texture of the general thought. That it is still easy to laugh at them is proved by the continued popularity of *Patience*, but, as we have seen, they stood for something which persists to-day and is the subject of anything but laughter—they stood for disillusionment. It drove them everywhere in search of a new sensation. They discovered emptiness.

"There is no such thing," wrote Oscar Wilde, "as romantic experience. There are romantic memories and there is the desire of romance—that is all. Our most fiery moments of ecstasy are merely shadows of what somewhere else we have felt, or of what we long some day to feel. . . . And strangely enough, what comes of this is a curious mixture of ardour and indifference—I myself would sacrifice everything for a new experience, and I know there is no such thing as a new experience at all."

In the attempt to make for themselves a paradise of new sensations they determined to refuse no means lawful or unlawful—but especially unlawful. For help in their task they betook themselves to Nerval and to Baudelaire. In Théophile Gautier's famous introduction to the *Fleurs du Mal* they found their dogma finally stated. There were also their own spiritual brethren, the Symbolistes-Décadents, and



especially there was Huysmans's *A Rebours*, of which it is written by Oscar Wilde that "things dimly dreamed of were suddenly made real in it."

The second group of thinkers also shrank from surveying the plight into which the world had fallen. The movement of their thought is quieter and more dreamy. Trouble has come on the world, because men have been blind to the forces, more powerful than reason, which sway the spirit. Ardour and inspiration must give way to a kind of mystical contemplation, reason must be dethroned in favour of intuition.

What of all the will to do ?  
It has vanished long ago,  
For a dream-shaft pierced it through  
From the unknown Archer's bow.

What of all the soul to think ?  
Some one offered it a cup  
Filled with a diviner drink,  
And the flame has burned it up.

What of all the hope to climb ?  
Only in the self we grope  
To the misty end of time :  
Truth has put an end to hope.

So sings A. E., and Yeats has much of the same tone concerning—

The dim wisdoms old and deep  
That God gives man in sleep.

And the moment, 1893, was favourable for the publication of *The Celtic Twilight*. It is interesting to note that these thinkers have also their affinities with France. Yeats had become acquainted with that crazy charlatan who named himself "Sar Péladan," the Rosicrucian mystic. But Yeats de-

liberately and persistently drew his main inspiration, not from abroad, but from his native land and folklore. The feature in his thought which most attracted the attention of his English readers was certainly a constant preoccupation with a world of disembodied spirits surrounding man on every side, a world not ruled by laws that he has learnt to obey, a world of wonder and terror into which he may at any moment be rapt away. But the poet might find in this spirit world, in this dream world, a beauty, a truth and a freedom that his workaday hours could not know.

As thus our songs arose : " You stars  
Across your wandering ruby cars  
Shake the loose reins : you slaves of God,  
He rules you with an iron rod,  
He holds you with an iron bond,  
Each one woven to the other,  
Each one woven to his brother,  
Like bubbles on a frozen pond ;  
But we in a lovely land abide  
Unchainable as the dim tide,  
With hearts that know nor law nor rule  
And hands that hold no wearisome tool,  
Folded in love that knows no morrow,  
Nor the gray wandering osprey sorrow."

And yet again this voice forbids us to hunger fiercely after truth ; and there is one utterance of Yeats to be quoted here which will gain a new significance when we come to consider our own plight in this day :

Seek then  
No learning from the starry men  
Who follow with the optic glass  
The whirling ways of stars that pass  
Dream, dream, for this is also sooth.

It is from this point perhaps that the revival of mysticism in poetry contemporary with ourselves

can be traced, although in the years between then and now other influences were certainly at work, besides the Celtic Twilight of Yeats, A.E. and Fiona Macleod—for instance, the poetry of Francis Thompson, of whom it was written that “His only realities were spiritual ; his only adventures in the land of visions.”

But there are other attitudes besides those of despair or of mystic withdrawal to be distinguished in the literature of this moment. In 1891 George Bernard Shaw published *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* and in the following year *Widowers' Houses*. As the Decadents had found their affinities in Baudelaire and the Symbolistes-Décadents, so did Shaw in Ibsen and in Schopenhauer. But of all the motives of his mind which so rudely shocked the public of the Nineties, that which must concern us in this context is his attack upon romanticism and idealism. “The idealist,” he wrote, “is a more dangerous man than the Philistine, just as a man is a more dangerous animal than a sheep.” And again, “Our ideals, like the gods of old, are constantly demanding human sacrifices.” But while he attacks idealism, he rejects materialism and realism. How the recoil from these two philosophies had affected his fellow-countrymen and driven them to the worship of dreams has already been hinted. But Shaw does not follow them here. Reason, which he describes as Dagon, Moloch and Jehovah rolled into one, is deposed in favour of the will to live. And it is because materialism leaves no room within its galvanised iron ash-bin for the “will to live” that he will have none of it. He is a realist in the sense that he believes in the importance of seeing things as they are and of destroying all shams—especially sham ideals and sham romance. While in *The*

*Quintessence of Ibsenism* a distinct flavour of Nietzsche is discernible, Shaw had not even heard of that philosopher in 1891. This is worth noting because he himself makes this comment: "I attach great importance to the evidence that the movement voiced by Schopenhauer, Wagner, Ibsen, Nietzsche and Strindberg was a world movement, and would have found expression if every one of those writers had perished in his cradle."

But none of the writers hitherto mentioned could in the Nineties command the same attention from the general public as Rudyard Kipling. Here is a curious mixture of realism and romance—a determination to see in life, as it was then developing, a hope of greatness and beauty. There is, then, in Kipling, no revolt against the mechanisation of life, or against preoccupation with material interests, but a belief that these tendencies can run in harness with a high idealism. This harmonious co-operation he found embodied in the British Empire. That Empire stood for commercial and industrial expansion, but, far more important, it stood for the propagation of a special view of life, for the ideals of chivalry, with their attendant virtues of endurance and adventurousness. By one people alone, by the British, had these ideals been assimilated. As for others—the lesser tribes without the Law—they must give way or be crushed. And the list of virtues of the chosen people included discipline and the immediate recognition of the greater man by his weaker brethren. As the Chosen Race must lord it over the Gentiles, so within the Race the greater man must rule the weaker. But Kipling did not deliberately shut his eyes to weaknesses and imperfections. If he believed—as he did passionately

believe—in the British supremacy in India, he saw also virtues in the native races and corruption in the rulers. He sings the glory of adventurous travel, but no one has drawn more faithful pictures of the incidental hardships and degradations. The poet who really believed that the Lord had given the British dominion over palm and pine also painted the portrait of Badalia Herodsfoot.

Finally—to close this brief and precarious review of the new movements or tendencies—we discern two or three figures standing in a sense apart and not forming a group or attracting much comment. There is no good reason why much space should be devoted to them here. The day of Thomas Hardy was not yet ; there will be more to say of him when the Nineteen-twenties are being dealt with. The position of Meredith is one of the puzzles of literary history. Philosophically he belongs to the decade of the Nineties more than any of the great names hitherto mentioned ; for in that aspect he seems to be grouped with Huxley and Herbert Spencer. There were few writers of the time more highly esteemed by the greater of his contemporaries ; there are few who seem to have had less influence on his contemporaries or on the next generation. It is as if by some curious irony of destiny he had succeeded in removing himself further from what was vital and fruitful in the thought of his time than the remotest and mistiest of the Celtic Twilight group. And yet, as we have said, in certain aspects he is more the man of the late Nineteenth Century than Wilde or Henley or Francis Thompson. Except to note that he was a lover of Browning and that Browning admired the originality and force of his earlier poetry, we need not linger with him.

Of Walter Pater rather more falls to be said. It may seem that in a logical arrangement he would have been grouped with the Decadent Æsthetes because there was so much in his thought and in his manner which was bound to have a strong appeal to them—for instance, the careful deliberate reflection upon an inner experience, the remoteness from contemporary political or social issues, and above all the preciousness of style and the refinement of taste in measuring and valuing the minutest differences of sensation and impression. “Experience,” he said, “is ringed round for each one of us by that thick wall of personality through which no real voice has ever pierced on its way to us, or from us to that which we can only conjecture to be without. Every one of those impressions is the impression of an individual in his isolation, each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world.” Elsewhere in the same essay, “A counted number of pulses only is given us of a variegated dramatic life. How may we see in them all that is to be seen in them by the finest senses? How shall we pass most swiftly from point to point and be present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy? To burn always with this hard gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life.” Such a doctrine of swift brilliance, at once hard and uneasy, reads like a passage from a Decadent manifesto. Pater was very well aware of this, and that was the reason why he cut out the essay from the second edition of *The Renaissance*. However, the words had been written and cannot be wiped out. They reveal a temper of thought which it is hardly unjust to call artificiality—paradoxical as that may seem in a writer who

so insistently maintained the artist's obligation of sincerity.

But the chief reason why Pater could not be omitted from this part of our study is not his affinity with the Decadents, but the new doctrine of criticism which he set up and which in our own time may be said to have established itself irremovably. Criticism is to become subjective. The new critic does not ask what is Aristotle's pleasure in the matter. He will not accept the ruling of Coleridge and apply it to whatever work he may be considering. He must look not outwards to a received dogma, but inwards to his own impressions. He asks, in Pater's own words, "What is this song or picture, this engaging personality presented in life or book, to me? Does it give me pleasure? If so, what sort and degree of pleasure? How is my nature modified by its presence and under its influence?" Professor Saintsbury has drawn out in all its detail the history of the development of this critical attitude. If in a certain sense it was no new thing, yet this way of expressing it, this full and direct expression of it, was new for the public who read the essays in *The Renaissance*.

The attempt has been made to group the new tendencies of critical thought in this decade, and according to the plan laid down the time has come to inquire concerning each group first, what estimate it might have been expected to form of the poetry of Browning, and, secondly, what estimate it did actually form.

It has been suggested that in most of the groups a strong sense of disillusionment is present. Towards the end of his life it is clear that Browning himself felt the temptation to despair. But he overcame it

and it would be a freak of criticism to pretend that his general optimism was ever modified in any important respect. Nor again could it be hoped that the Decadents with their ideal of artificiality would find in him any sort of encouragement. Browning also had his paradise, but there was nothing artificial in it. And though he desired new experiences, they were not such as would attract Oscar Wilde. His attitude towards new experiences may be brought out by comparing him in this respect with the Decadents' patron saint, Baudelaire. Let us attempt to read, in the light of Browning's attitude to life, the conclusion of Baudelaire's *La Mort*. The first stanza of it might almost have been written by Browning. It is easy to imagine him saying in his own way :

O Mort, vieux capitaine, il est temps ! levons l'ancre.

And again the epilogue to *Fifine (The Householder)* with its cry—

Ah, but if you knew how time has dragged, days, nights !

If you knew but how I dwelt down here !

might be compared with—

Ce pays nous ennuie, O Mort ! Appareillons.

And the next two lines can also be read as Browning—

Si le ciel et la mer sont noirs comme de l'encre,  
Nos cœurs que tu connais sont remplis de rayons !

But at the second verse the comparison breaks down, for the poet who wrote his *Epilogue* to *Asolando* stood at the very opposite pole of thought from the poet who wrote :



Verse nous ton poison pour qu'il nous réconforte !  
Nous voulons, tant ce feu nous brûle le cerveau,  
Plonger au fond du gouffre, Enfer on Ciel, qu'importe ?  
Au fond de l'Inconnu pour trouver du *nouveau*.<sup>1</sup>

But this latter mood is the mood of the Decadents. And like Baudelaire they knew that this "new thing" would never be accorded—"there is no such thing as a new experience." But in actual fact the Decadents did not attack, they did not even disown, Browning. In view of what is to follow in later chapters, it is worth while collecting the evidence for this statement. The first point to be noted is that it was, perhaps, in their tradition to read Browning. For their tradition, as we have seen, was handed down to them from the Pre-Raphaelites through Swinburne. Rossetti had admired *Pauline* so much that he transcribed the whole of it in the British Museum ; and he wrote to ask Browning if he was the author. "To him it seemed the work of an unconscious pre-Raphælite," says Professor Herford. "My brother," says W. M. Rossetti, "by readings, recitations and preachments, imposed Browning as a sort of dogmatic standard upon the P.R.B." And William Morris wrote in the poet's praise in the Oxford and Cambridge Magazine.

The case of Swinburne is rather less simple. He began by admiring Browning, and M. Georges Lafourcade has traced influences of Browning's style in some of the earlier poems. Then there is, in 1875, the essay on Chapman, in which he discusses Browning's merits or defects as a dramatic poet. The passage in question begins by rebutting the

<sup>1</sup> As a matter of fact, Browning would have approved of anyone who boldly and with all his energies pressed on to any goal he had proposed himself—*The Statue and the Bust* proves this. But he would not have made a sonnet, but a long psychological study.

charge of obscurity so constantly levelled at Browning. One characteristic sentence at least must be quoted: "He is something too much the reverse of obscure; he is too brilliant and subtle for the ready reader of a ready writer to follow with any certainty the track of an intelligence which moves with such incessant rapidity, or even to realise with what spiderlike swiftness and sagacity his building spirit leaps and lightens to and fro and backward and forward as it lives along the animated line of his labour, springs from thread to thread and darts from centre to circumference of the glittering and quivering web of living thought woven from the inexhaustible stores of his perception and kindled from the inexhaustible fire of his imagination." But he is not in the strict sense a dramatist so much as a practising barrister. He had "an unique and incomparable genius of analysis," but he represents his characters as analysing themselves and expressing the results of their analysis with an insight and a delicacy and a thoroughness of which they were incapable.

And in Swinburne's sonnet sequence, written just after Browning's death, the greatness which he chiefly praises is this:

O Spirit of man, what mystery moves in thee  
That he might know not of in spirit, and see  
The heart within the heart that seems to strive. . . .

Oscar Wilde, then, is almost following a tradition when he praises Browning, and, like Swinburne's, his praise also is qualified. In an article originally published in the *Nineteenth Century* he wrote: "Taken as a whole the man was great . . . he is the most Shakesporean creature since Shakespeare. If Shakespeare could sing with a myriad lips, Browning

could stammer through a thousand mouths." When later on this critique was incorporated in *Intentions* and took the form of a dialogue, Wilde added this passage :

*Ernest* : There is something in what you say, but there is not everything in what you say. In many points you are unjust.

*Gilbert* : It is difficult not to be unjust to what one loves.<sup>1</sup>

Wilde, too, anticipating the judgment of Henry James twenty years later, prophesies that Browning will be remembered as a writer of fiction. This calls up to his mind another writer also much talked of for his obscurity, George Meredith, and he concludes his paragraph with a characteristic epigram, "Meredith is a prose Browning, and so is Browning." But though he does not in this essay make any special reference to Browning's psychological insight, he says in one of his letters—referring to a previous meeting with his correspondent, "It was an hour intensely dramatic and intensely psychological—and, in art, only Browning can make action and psychology one." And again, "In our meeting there was a touch of Browning—keen curiosity, wonder, delight."

The main qualification which Wilde makes in his praise of Browning is that his technique falls so far short of perfection and that on this account he will not be remembered as a poet. His chief praise is for the variety and scope of his work. "Taken as a whole, the man was great . . ." What surprises in this criticism is that the admirer of Huysmans should not have dwelt upon certain features in Browning's

<sup>1</sup> Is it mere fancy to connect this with these lines from Browning's lyrical epilogue to *The Melon Seller* (*Ferishtah's Fancies*) ?

Be unjust for once, Love ! Bear it—and I may

Oh, so all unjust,—the less deserved, the more divine.

work which in spirit and intuition come so close to the work of the French author. There is, for one thing, Browning's joy in rich textures and in gorgeous colours. A score of passages could be quoted in illustration of this—for example :

Who has not heard how Tyrian shells  
 Enclosed the blue, that dye of dyes  
 Whereof one drop worked miracles,  
 And coloured like Astarte's eyes  
 Raw silk the merchant sells ?

Enough to furnish Solomon  
 Such hangings for his cedar house,  
 That when gold-robed he took the throne  
 In that abyss of blue, the Spouse  
 Might swear his presence shone

Most like the centre-spike of gold  
 Which burns deep in the bluebell's womb,  
 What time, with ardours manifold  
 The bee goes singing to her groom,  
 Drunken and overbold.

How comes it that Wilde overlooked *Childe Roland*, where phrase after phrase reminds one of Huysmans's love of " les sites lépreux ? "

As for the grass, it grew as scant as hair  
 In leprosy ; thin dry blades pricked the mud,  
 Which underneath looked kneaded up with blood.  
 One stiff blind horse, his every bone a-stare,  
 Stood stupefied, however he came there :  
 Thrust out past service from the devil's stud !

Could the lover of Baudelaire have avoided mentioning another surprising parallel ? In *Amphibian* comes this :

What if a certain soul  
 Which early slipped its sheath,  
 And has for its home the whole  
 Of heaven, thus look beneath,

Thus watch one who in the world,  
Both lives and likes life's way

But sometimes when the weather  
Is blue and warm waves tempt  
To free oneself of tether  
And try a life exempt

From worldly noise and dust,  
In the sphere which overbrims  
With passion and thought,—why, just  
Unable to fly, one swims !

And in *Spleen et Idéal* (III *Élévation*) Baudelaire writes :

Au dessus des étangs, au dessus des vallées  
Des montagnes, des bois, des nuages, des mers . . .

Mon esprit, tu te meus avec agilité,  
Et comme un bon nageur qui se pâme dans l'onde,  
Tu sillonnes gaîment l'immensité profonde. . . .

And the horse in *Childe Roland* is worthy to be side by side with the horse in Baudelaire's *Un Gravure Fantastique*.

Sans éperons, sans fouet, il essouffle un cheval  
Fantôme comme lui, rosse apocalyptique,  
Qui bave des naseaux comme un épileptique.

It is certain that when these lines are restored to their context, the total effect is in the two poets hopelessly irreconcilable, but they indicate some sort of common ground in particulars of the imagination. One might have expected the Decadents to note such things in Browning, if only to lament that they were allied to a point of view in their eyes so false and worthless. The probable explanation seems to be that Oscar Wilde and those who saw life as he saw it were blind to such qualities in Browning because they

had not gone to look for them. Probably they did not trouble very much to question the accepted view of Browning as a champion of conventional morality, an optimist, a stranger even if a distinguished stranger.

Among other contributors to the *Yellow Book* was Arthur Symonds, whose book on Symbolism shows his strong sympathies with the literature of those French poets whose work was exercising a strong influence on the Decadent *Æsthetes*. Yet in his book, *An Introduction to the Study of Browning*, there is nothing to make any reader suspect that he was not in complete sympathy with the general attitude and the critical standards of the Browning Society itself. Actually this book was written in 1886, but as in the preface to the second edition, in 1906, the author says that his views on Browning as a poet have not changed, we may be justified in mentioning it in this chapter. Like Wilde, he compares Browning with Shakespeare—but without Wilde's qualifications. He notes the unity of conception of all the vast mass of his work, explains the special dramatic quality of it, notes the keenness of his perception of motive, the range and variety of his poetry, and defends him at length against the accusations of obscurity and lack of artistry. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that, judging his poet as a whole, he will admit of no imperfections in him.

Of the "Celtics," William Sharp had been a personal friend of Browning. He wrote a monograph, and a memorial poem, but both of these in the days before Fiona Macleod had come into being. There is not easily distinguishable, either in the monograph or in the memorial poem, any characteristic "Celtic" tendency of thought or emotion.

And, indeed, from the rest of this group of writers came no definite and direct expression of opinion on Browning. On the other hand, Francis Thompson praised him in an article in the *Academy*. After Wilde's epigram about the prose Browning, Thompson's verdict falls wholly flat—that Browning is a verse Meredith. He names Browning “an indisputable poet,” and denies that he “had or thought himself to have any message” for his public. And in a certain sense this denial of a message is true and salutary. It is true as regards any work of Browning's which is genuinely dramatic: and in this regard it is salutary because of the almost universal tendency in those times to quote as Browning's views the views of any and all of the characters he brought on to his stage. But in the concluding part of *The Ring and the Book* Browning in his own person delivers a message to the public which liked him not. And the message sounds curiously discrepant from what was in those days—and has been since those days—the accepted notion of Browning's teaching.

So British public, who may like me yet,  
(Marry and amen !) learn one lesson hence  
Of many which whatever lives should teach :  
This lesson, that our human speech is naught,  
Our human testimony false, our fame  
And human estimation words and wind.

And the whole of *La Saisiaz* is a message—a message of hope. That he might make it more effectual, Browning longs for fame :

Fame ! Then give me fame, a moment ! As I gather at a glance  
Human glory after glory vivifying yon expanse,  
Let me grasp them all together, hold on high and brandish well  
Beacon-like above the rapt world ready, whether heaven or hell  
Send the blazing summons earthwards, to submit itself the same.

How to explain Thompson's blindness to all this ? Only by supposing that he, like Oscar Wilde, brought preconceived notions to his survey of Browning. Wilde's preconceived notions came from outside himself—from the general opinion. Thompson's came from within himself, from his meditations upon what poetry should not be, namely a sermon in verse.

George Bernard Shaw was a member of the Browning Society. It is true that he was a disruptive element, but he did desire that his fellow-members should "read their Browning." Judging by the evidence of the "Papers," he hardly ever spoke at a meeting without shocking the Society. He shocked them by declaring that Browning was not a great dramatic poet. In proof he cited *Caliban upon Setebos*. Caliban, he said, as depicted by Browning, combined "the introspective powers of a Hamlet" with the "theology of an evangelical Churchman." Now, it was unthinkable that an evangelical Churchman should have the introspective powers of a Hamlet. There is a resemblance here to the view expressed by Swinburne in the Chapman essay. In *Caliban upon Setebos* Browning is in effect pleading Caliban's cause, as a barrister might plead it ; he could see into the machinery of that savage mind and expose its workings with a completeness and certainty of which the savage himself would have been incapable. Perhaps it was this keenness of vision which attracted Shaw, and the fact that Browning was no dreamer in the ordinary sense of that word. It may be—there cannot be certainty on the point—that Browning's own view concerning poets and dreamers is uttered by Don Juan in *Fifine at the Fair*.



A poet never dreams :  
 We prose folk always do : we miss the proper duct  
 For thoughts on things unseen . . .  
 . . . What ghosts do poets see ?  
 What daemons fear ? What man or thing misapprehend ?

But his wide-awake eyes certainly did not see what to the eyes of George Bernard Shaw was so clear : they did not see through romance to the Life Force. He was not a realist—nor is Shaw : he did not exalt reason above other faculties (Dean Inge calls him a misologist)—and what Shaw said about reason has already been quoted.

That Rudyard Kipling felt the influence of Browning can be proved from his own poems ; and one recalls the delight with which Beetle discovered *Men and Women* in the Head's library. We are not told whether Beetle (who is said to be a projection of some part of his creator's personality) was affected by *La Saisiaz*. One of Kipling's greatest stories *At the End of the Passage* closes with a quotation from *Cristina*. After the dreadful episode of Hummil dying in an agonised and terrifying dream, as his three friends are preparing to ride away to their several stations, one of them, Spurstow, sums up the situation thus :

There may be Heaven : there must be Hell:  
 Meanwhile we have our life here. We-ell ?

This is a curious instance of 'misquotation'. The words are exact, but the punctuation is wrong. For the mark of interrogation replaces an exclamation mark in the original poem. What Spurstow meant by "We-ell ?" is—"Is there anything to add ?" or "What shall we do about it ?" or some such question. What Browning meant by "Well !" is

"So be it. It is well!" And that exclamation would not have been at all appropriate at the end of Kipling's story. But from Browning, the poet of imperialism gained, and could have gained, little beyond delight in the poems for themselves, for their vitality, their colour, their technique and especially their vocabulary. Browning—unless we make a doubtful exception of a few of the earlier poems—might never have heard of the British Empire, and there is no evidence that he believed that the happiness of the world depended upon the British code of conduct being imposed upon all other peoples.

As for Walter Pater, there seems little enough in common between him and the fighting poet. Nevertheless, Pater had spoken strong words of praise in his essay on Winckelmann in *The Renaissance*. It is the artistry of Browning which he there praises. "The base of all artistic genius," he says, "is the power . . . of putting a happy world of its own creation in place of the meaner world of common days." This function poetry can accomplish "in the choice and development of some special situation which lifts or glorifies a character, in itself poetical. . . . The poems of Robert Browning supply brilliant examples of this power. His poetry is pre-eminently the poetry of situations." It is in the character of Pater to see in Browning the special power of substituting for the grey and tasteless realities of life a poetical world more highly coloured and of a fuller savour. He praises *Le Byron de nos Jours* because in it "an artificial light is constructed and broken over the chosen situation. . . ." This was in 1873. Thirteen years later he reviewed in the *Guardian* Arthur Symonds's *Introduction to the*

*Study of Browning.* And any attentive reader of Marius the Epicurean would find it hard not to gasp in his surprise when, turning to this *Guardian* essay, he found the following sentence—"Certainly, we shall not quarrel with Mr. Symons for reckoning Mr. Browning, among English poets, second to Shakespeare alone. . . ." What immediately follows in the text might possibly be stretched to mean that Pater was thinking of the quantity rather than the quality of Browning's work. Nevertheless, his praise is genuine and makes no reserves. "Mr. Symons," he says, "is right in laying emphasis on the grace, the finished skill, the music, native and ever ready to the poet himself—tender, manly, humorous, awe-stricken—when speaking in his own proper person." The highest praise he bestows on *Pippa Passes* and *Men and Women*. But, to revert, such a verdict as this is a little surprising from the Neo-Cyrenaic, from the critic who is held by some to have erred in attempting to approximate the function of poetry too closely to the function of music. That he did not regard Browning's melody as impeccable might be thought likely on general grounds, and also from the fact that in speaking of the interest in music shown in *Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha*, *Abt Vogler* and so on, he is careful to say that it is Browning's interest in music which is unique. And yet there is no ambiguity in the phrase "the music, native and ever ready to the poet himself." The curious contrast—noted by another critic (anonymous) of this time—between Browning's love and intimate knowledge of music and his rough unmelodious verse would surely, if it had been present to his consciousness, have been noted by the man who said that "all art constantly

aspires towards the condition of music ; music being the typical or ideally consummate art."

To sum up, the contributions made to Browning criticism by the leading minds of this decade are not remarkable for originality, nor do they seem likely to be of permanent value. That these men should have had comparatively little to say of Browning is peculiar. It is peculiar because there was so much in the poet which might have been expected to draw their fiercest attacks, and there were some things which might have been expected to win their admiration. Wilde and those who followed him did not attack the optimism of Browning nor the bourgeois element in much of his work. How eloquent might they have grown over the fact that one of Browning's favourite novels was *Madame Bovary* ! They do not even seem to have known that. Then there were certain poems which, by a slight and almost pardonable distortion, they could have represented as prophecies of their own kingdom of the artificial. Yet again we have seen the curious inconsistencies of Pater in his *Guardian* article ; and to that we may add this remark that the critic did not appear to realise how closely in spirit he was walking with the poet in making it a cardinal doctrine of his criticism that for each of us experience is ringed round by a wall of personality. He had forgotten—

What though fancy scarce may grapple with the complex and  
immense

" His own world for every mortal " ?

and again—

Knowledge stands on my experience : all outside its narrow  
hem,

Free surmise may sport and welcome . . .

We seem to find repeated in this decade the anomaly which we remarked in the critical background of the Fifties—that is to say, the failure to apply its own characteristic critical standards to the poet's work. In both decades what surprises us is that this element which ought to have been pronounced a defect (one would think) and that other which might have been praised go unnoticed or are differently interpreted. Perhaps we shall find the same anomaly when we come to examine the attitude of less distinguished readers of the poet.

CHAPTER IV

*THE NINETIES (Continued)*

*THE BROWNING SOCIETY—J. T. NETTLE-  
SHIP—MRS. ORR*

**M**. GEORGES LAFOURCADE reproduces in *La Jeunesse de Swinburne* the following fragment which has been preserved in Mr. T. J. Wise's collection :

Thus runs our wise men's song :  
Being dark, it must be light  
And most things are so wrong  
That all things must be right ;  
God must mean well, he works so ill by this world's laws.

This, when our souls are drowning,  
Falls on them like a benison ;  
This satisfies our Browning  
And this delights our Tennyson :  
And soothed Britannia simpers in serene applause.

And certainly, if there was any truth in the opening passage of the last chapter, Britannia had need of soothing. She felt there were in her midst anarchists who threatened her with the dissolution of all that had seemed most stable and necessary in her thought. In this time of distress she rallied her champions ; and in that band she counted Tennyson and Browning. Their greatness as poets had been firmly established, and they had even been by some ranked with Shakespeare and Milton. The tendency, which had prevailed through so many centuries,

to believe that a great poet is a great teacher, was strengthened in an age in which a majority of the reading public felt the need of being reassured and strengthened in matters of religion and morality. They wanted to be reassured that man was immortal, that there was a God, that the old moral ideals were not illusive, that the established hierarchy of virtues had not been upset—in short, that God was in His Heaven and all was right with the world. If in this frame of mind they read the two poets, it was almost inevitable that they should prefer Browning to Tennyson. For in Tennyson, even when there was not uneasiness, there was doubt; and belief in the ultimate goodness of things, in the worth-whileness of life, shines with a more subdued light in the author of *Crossing the Bar* than in the author of *Prospice* or the *Epilogue to Asolando*. An obituary notice of Tennyson praising his adherence to the accepted moral standards and religious beliefs speaks of his “wistful yet persistent faith in God in Duty and in Immortal Love.” And once more, “It is only moral fidelity, well-disciplined conduct and rightly ordered life that can be the parents of that divine sensitiveness to eternal verities which opens up the avenues of the mind to spiritual assurance, though not to intellectual certainty.” Now, Britannia felt herself safer with intellectual certainty than with wistful faith.

These were days in which anyone who proclaimed that he did not read Browning, or that he disliked him, ran the risk of being branded as an uneducated person or, worse, an eccentric. But perhaps it was even more dangerous to admire him too much, for that was to be an intellectual prig. These opinions are very clearly recorded in the periodical literature

of the age. There was praise and blame in most of the articles in reviews. The *Edinburgh*, it is true, had learnt nothing and forgotten nothing. "His scholarship was imperfect, and he was insensible to the niceties of language and composition . . . involved parentheses—obscure periphrases . . . whimsical experiments in metre . . . extravagant combinations of rhyme." And again, "Mr. Browning's characters are for the most part branded with depravity and guilt." Is it fanciful to hear in such language nothing more than an echo of the voice of the Fifties? The echo persists elsewhere—in the *Athenæum*, for instance, whose reviewer, in tones of the sincerest praise, exclaims: "In his depicting of love, he is pre-eminently the gentleman." Speaking generally, it would seem that Browning's obscurity and the harshness of his verse, the aridity and involution of most of his later work—all this was pronounced blameworthy. But these faults were judged to have been redeemed by the profundity of his thought, by his optimism, his courage and sometimes (though the point is by no means always made) by his keen insight into the minds of men. They praised "a deep one-ness in his teaching," his "splendid courage and confidence," his "priceless gems of thought too roughly set," his "indomitable—not exactly optimism, but determination to make and find life worth living," his "marvellous vigour of intellect," his "power of delivering an electric shock."

The obituary notices of the poet do not fail to remark that, great as his reputation was, the number of his readers—of his faithful readers—was small in comparison with the readers of Tennyson. "For a large majority of the English reading public," said



one review, "this kingly poet remains a name only." This fact had not escaped Dr. Furnivall, and in his enthusiasm he determined to take steps to right the wrong. Hence the Browning Society of London. That Society must occupy our attention for a while because of the very important influence it had upon Browning's reputation. The period of its fullest activity was the Eighties, but it survived on through the first few years of the next decade. The marvel is that it did not expire sooner from the shafts of ridicule aimed at it from all sides. Yet anyone who will take the trouble to discover what the Society was and what it aimed at, will be struck by the unfairness of the attacks upon it. The fact is that even in its lifetime very few people outside the Society knew much about it. The idea spread that it consisted of people who, moved by intellectual priggishness and conceit, looked upon themselves as an élite, possessing, they alone, the key to Browning's obscurities and taking a perverse delight in analysing the difficulties of *Sordello* and *Fifine at the Fair*. Thus Andrew Lang wrote that they praised Browning's poetry "chiefly because they believe that they alone understand it." The *London Quarterly* cried, "the wicked world resents their tone of superiority." The *Athenæum* blamed their "perverse ingenuity," and the *Saturday Review* pictured them as engaged in inventing "some far-fetched apologies for a strange, though not a poetical, licence."

Now, there is no evidence that the members of the Society were "wild" or that they assumed a tone of superiority, or claimed to be the only people who understood Browning. Far from being wild, they were, for the most part, respectable middle-class

people with a sprinkling of a few distinguished names—Bishop Westcott, Dr. Furnivall, George Bernard Shaw. They did not put on superior airs. They came together to study Browning's works and to encourage a wider reading of them. They felt that without serious and attentive study it was impossible to gather in what Browning had to give, and they hoped, by working together, to have mutual help in this serious and attentive study. For they believed that what Browning had to give them was not an occasion for mutual admiration accompanied by cigarettes and cocktails, but the very word of life. Nor did they believe that they alone could interpret Browning to the rest of the world. They by no means confined their efforts to elucidating obscurities. Typical titles of lectures and papers are "Browning's Treatment of Parenthood," "The Religious Teaching of Robert Browning," "The Wife-Love and Friend-Love of Robert Browning." They listened to Mr. (afterwards Sir) Walter Raleigh, Arthur Symonds, W. M. Rossetti, Professor Bury, Professor Herford. There is no more reason for imputing conceit and presumption to them than to any set of people who have ever met to listen to discourse on poetry in Bloomsbury or Balham, in Chelsea or in Palmer's Green. No doubt, since they were human, their motives were mixed, but on the whole it seems fairest to think of them as a group of some two hundred earnest, not particularly distinguished, people who were quite sincere lovers of Browning and were not gifted with enough sensibility or imaginative sympathy to perceive that, far from drawing more people to his poetry, they were tending to make him ridiculous. Browning thought that they had actually increased the sale of

his works : yet it is difficult to believe that this was so.

But let us return to the impulsive Dr. Furnivall. The story of his relations with Browning and with the Society is astounding and might lead anyone who was ignorant of his work in other fields and his happier relations with those whom he tried to serve to think that he was engaged in a profoundly subtle plot to ruin the poet's reputation. The late Sir Edmund Gosse once said, "Furnivall did not hate Browning, but he loved him with a *deadly* love." When Furnivall was discussing the formation of a Browning Society with a certain Miss Hickey (to whom, by a curious coincidence, the same idea had occurred quite independently), the latter timidly suggested that Browning might not approve of the scheme. Furnivall, not in any way perturbed by this suggestion, declared that he would proceed with his plan even if the poet disapproved. He wrote a paper for the Society in which he discussed Browning's ancestry. For the theory that Browning had negro blood in his veins he could find no certain proof : with keener regret he had to abandon the idea that he was partly Jewish : but he triumphantly demonstrated that the founder of the family was a butler. He raked out from the family records and held up with great glee for the inspection of the public the story of a breach of promise case in which Browning's father had been mixed up. He wrote a whole paper taken up with a grammatical analysis of the Invocation in *The Ring and the Book*—"O lyric Love . . ."

With such auspices did the Society begin its career. Of Browning's relations with the Society more may fall to be said in another place. They show up in

a very favourable light his tact, his modesty, his discretion and his sense of humour.

Three of the most prominent members of the Society were J. T. Nettleship, Mrs. Orr and Dr. Berdoe, each of whom produced books still fairly widely read. Mrs. Orr's life of the poet, in its latest edition revised by Sir F. G. Kenyon, still deserves to be considered the standard biography. Of more immediate interest in this context is her *Handbook*, written, as she herself says, at the request of the Browning Society, which in 1884<sup>1</sup> contributed £45 towards the expenses of publication. It was favourably, though not enthusiastically, received by the press, and ran into many editions. Nettleship's *Essays and Thoughts* was a much earlier work, first published in 1868. It was, however, considerably enlarged in subsequent editions, and included papers read to the Browning Society. Dr. Berdoe also read papers to the Society and compiled a Browning *Encyclopædia*.

None of these three books is likely to survive by virtue of literary merit or critical illumination, but in their day they have had some influence, and since they do reflect a particular attitude to Browning characteristic of the end of the last century, they cannot be passed over. Of Berdoe's *Encyclopædia* it is not necessary to say much. The author had read his poet frequently and faithfully, but few people who can claim to be educated will stand in need of his *Encyclopædia*, and though there are passages in it full of unintentional humour, they are hardly worth the labour of searching out. One instance will suffice. Berdoe is explaining the poem *Parting at Morning*:

<sup>1</sup> The book was published in 1885.

Round the cape of a sudden came the sea,  
And the sun looked over the mountain's rim :  
And straight was a path of gold for him,  
And the need of a world of men for me.

This is the explanation : " In the sequel the rising sun calls men to work : the man of the poem to work of a lucrative character ; and excites in the woman (if we interpret the slightly obscure line correctly) a desire for more society than the seaside home affords."

J. T. Nettleship was an artist—an animal painter. It may seem strange in this day that a member of the Browning Society should have been a contributor to *The Yellow Book*—but Nettleship's drawing, " Head of Minos," did not appear until the days when *The Yellow Book* had almost lost its colour. On the other hand, a surviving member of the Society has described Nettleship as " a quiescent member." Indeed, on one occasion he went so far as to sympathise with the poet upon the embarrassment which the existence of the Society must cause him. His book in its final form contains twenty-nine essays in addition to the Introduction and the " Last Words." They vary widely from mediocrity relieved by occasional flashes of real insight to sheer stupidity. The main object of the studies is to " evolve thoughts " rather than " to trace beauties or faults of construction," to " discover lessons for actual life " rather than " to examine historical evidences." A characteristic passage is this : " One may fairly presume that in giving us portraits of selfish love, the poet intended us to see . . . that the selfishness of it is in general a fatal drawback to its influence as a useful thing." Nettleship, indeed, judged by the standard of to-day—and, in

justice to the past, one must add, judged by the standards of Matthew Arnold and of Pater—was ill equipped for the work of a literary critic. For instance, if he was widely read in English and in foreign literature, he was unable or unwilling to make use of that reading. But he is found wanting in other fundamental qualities also. There should be in the critic a sense of proportion—something of its nature intuitive—which would have prevented Nettleship from committing the absurdities of his essays on *Saul* and *Childe Roland*. It has been noted that Nettleship's aim was "to evolve thoughts" and "discover lessons for actual life"—that is, to attempt to unfold the implications for conduct contained in Browning's poems. Consider the result in the case of *Saul*.

"Here are two human creatures, the one, sunk far down out of the empyræan, where life, the choragus, leads the chorus of humanity, to the rhythm of a voiceless melody in a perpetual dance of dazzling light; and another who has stooped, bidden by God, down from that empyræan, to plunge into the black slough in which, too inert and dead for any effort at escape, the lost man wallows silently. From the utmost verge of that black slough, from the far away gate of hell at which he lies, obstinately marrowless, so stupidly negative that even hell's king scorns to open and welcome him, who can bring him back? Can David, so white and joyous, so glowing with the life dance? Let us see."

This is the very acme of fatuity. It was this sort of thing which provoked the *National Observer's* parody:

“ God made Mr. Browning a Fisher of sins ; he trolls his lay and lo ! he brings up from the ooze of the infinite heart of man some blue mysterious lobster-like sin, boils it in the massy iron alembic of his imagination and exhibits it blushing scarlet for shame in the white light of his wife’s morality.”

But it is not the silliness of the thought which constitutes the chief offence of the passage—it is rather the entire misunderstanding of the whole purpose of the poem. The misunderstanding arises, clearly, from Nettleship’s determination that the poem shall at all costs be shown to have a moral—“ For us of to-day, then,” he asks, “ what is the lesson which the poet would teach ? ” And the poet himself had more than once answered such questions—his answer is clear to read in the title of the book—*Dramatic Romances and Lyrics*. But even if that answer seemed doubtful to a critic in the case of *Saul*, in the case of another poem it was plain enough. Dr. Furnivall put it on record that three separate times he had asked Browning whether there was any hidden or underlying meaning in *Childe Roland*, and every time Browning had answered “ No.” But even this did not prevent Nettleship from writing a paper on *Childe Roland* in which he finds “ a second meaning ”—“ That ‘ round squat turret . . . without counterpart in the whole world ’—may it not be some strange, seemingly fantastic end, which men have proposed to themselves ere now, as the one end which had in it the truth and was of power to set the world free and make it happy ? ” And so on through eighteen pages of close print. Nettleship was well aware of what he was doing, but he set out to justify himself by quoting George Eliot : “ The

words of genius bear a wider meaning than the thought which prompted them." The impression made by this essay upon Browning himself is worth noting here. A surviving member of the Browning Society has told the writer that he well remembers visiting the poet one Sunday morning and bringing for his perusal the copy of the *Browning Society Papers* which contained Nettleship's essay. Browning, after reading the paper, laughed heartily and remarked that he supposed it was there in the poem, though he hadn't known it when he wrote it ! Upon which the only comment is that not many poets would have been provoked to laughter by such treatment. But there is a point here which will be dealt with presently when the attitude of Browning towards his critics is being considered.

That Nettleship in his explanations of various poems or passages in poems should very often have been wrong is in itself unimportant, but it is worth pausing to consider the kind of mistake of which he was guilty. It will be convenient to take as an example his comment on *Fifine at the Fair*. Two points must be brought out sharply. First, as we should expect, Nettleship treats the whole thing as a long-drawn-out lesson in conduct. Secondly, since Browning had acknowledged that there was an element of sophistry in the poem, Nettleship in his paraphrase employs three signs by which to distinguish those parts which seem to him sophistical, those which contain a mixture of truth and sophistry, and those which are true. It need hardly be said that, having approached the poem with the declared intention of finding in it a moral and of marking off sophistry and truth, he was exposed to a temptation, which in the event proved irresistible, to give a



strained interpretation to many passages. Here is an example. In stanza xvi the Don Juan of the poem makes a simple statement. "I ask," he says, "but to understand .

The acknowledged victory of whom I call my queen,  
Sexless and bloodless sprite : though mischievous and mean,  
Yet free and flower like too, with loveliness for law  
And self sustainment made morality."

There is nothing in those lines (taken in their context) which could be called obscure. Don Juan is attracted by those things in gipsy-life which the more respectable part of the community call lawless. He wants to analyse this attraction—to discover why this creature Fifine—sexless, bloodless, mischievous, mean—attracts him. Nettleship's actual paraphrase of the lines quoted, though not illuminating, is not wide of the mark : and yet he has labelled the passage sophistry. Why ? Presumably because he did not like to think that Browning could be attracted by an immoral person like Fifine—or perhaps, more generally, that he could feel the attraction of a Bohemian existence—that he was capable of taking sides with the Bohemian against the bourgeois.

Still more serious, however, is Nettleship's entire misunderstanding of one of the most important passages in the whole poem. In that passage is embodied an interesting philosophy, poles asunder from what is accepted as characteristic of Browning's point of view. It occurs in stanza cxxviii, and again the meaning is not obscure. The claim that there is a soul or spiritual power controlling the universe is supported in this passage by just the fact that man's soul is not exalted by such a belief, finds no triumph in it—only submission, since the soul of the in-

dividual can take no pride in acknowledging that another soul plays master everywhere. Now, in Nettleship's paraphrase this passage is marked as containing neither sophistry, nor a mixture of truth and sophistry, but the very truth. But before receiving it as true he has misinterpreted it. He says in his paraphrase what Don Juan in the poem neither says nor implies, that "the ultimate truth" learned by the soul is "the approach of the body's death," and that in this thought "there is no cause for pride, for this truth merely warns the soul its right of rule will go and another soul succeeding it must be master in future." This is not in the poem. The ultimate truth of which Don Juan is speaking is not the approach of the body's death but the existence of an all-controlling spirit. The passage as transfigured or mutilated by Nettleship would not be found a stumbling-block by anyone and is not out of line with orthodox Christian teaching—whereas what Don Juan really did utter was a characteristic pagan thought.

But the whole passage is so interesting both in itself and because of its strange reaction upon a typical interpreter like Nettleship, that there is no excuse needed for dwelling upon it a little longer. The argument of the passage is based upon an analogy between body and soul. The bodily organism in its evolution through immensely long periods takes to itself—assimilates—whatever promotes its well-being, its own personal interests. It knows what it wants—it never makes a mistake. In a similar kind of way (but with one hugely important difference) the soul or mind selects among opinions or beliefs those which it thinks most likely to make it happy—which in practice means, those

most flattering to its pride. The difference between the body and the mind of the individual is that the mind makes mistakes. The opinions which it has selected because they flatter its pride have no basis in reality. If, then, we do ever find that the mind accepts an opinion or belief which does not make it happier and does not flatter its sense of self-importance, we can only suppose that there is some special property in the conception which compels acceptance, however reluctant the mind may be. And this property can be none other than truth. The whole passage, from one point of view, is an expression of a simple thought, that of what we call truths, the disagreeable ones are likely to be the truest. We cannot know for certain what mark Nettleship would have put against this passage if he had read it aright, but it is difficult to believe that he would have called it the very truth without immediately adding a long footnote to explain that all really was right with the world.

One of the essays in Nettleship's *Studies* is a review of Mrs. Sutherland Orr's *Handbook*. It begins with these words :

“ If the Browning Societies had done nothing else—and much sterling work has been evoked by them—we should be grateful to them for having evoked Mrs. Orr's handbook. . . . It is clear, exhaustive within its limits, and authentic throughout.” . . .

Other critics also spoke in its favour, but the *London Quarterly* strongly disapproved; and the main ground of disapproval is that the author misrepresented Browning's views. And thus at the moment of the book's appearance we find that on

the one hand a reviewer who was well acquainted with the writer and with Browning describes it as authentic, while another reviewer condemns it for traducing the poet's thought. And, indeed, the question of the authenticity of the book is one of the minor puzzles of literary history.

Let us first consider the facts of the situation as far as they are known. Mrs. Orr was a sister of Sir Frederic Leighton. Her health was weak, and in particular she suffered from defective eyesight. That the friendship between herself and Browning can be described as intimate there is little doubt. She first made the acquaintance of Browning and Mrs. Browning in Paris in 1855. In later years Browning used to read to her twice a week. According to Thomas Hardy, some of Browning's friends believed "that there was something tender between Mrs. Orr and Browning. 'Why don't they settle it?' said Mrs. Proctor." But others who also knew both the poet and his interpreter declare that on his side, at any rate, there was never anything "tender." There, however, is a point which must be left to the biographers. What concerns us is this question—from so close a friendship, what could we deduce as to the authenticity of the *Handbook*? It seems impossible that there should not have been frequent discussions of the poet's more difficult passages. And, indeed, we know that there were discussions—the preface to the second edition says: "By Mr. Browning's desire, I have corrected two mistakes." One of these was "a misreading of an historical allusion in *The Statue and the Bust*." And again she says, "I should have stated in my first Preface . . . that I owe to Mr. Browning's kindness all the additional matter which my own reading could not

supply . . .” and this edition contains the signed notes by the poet. The case for authenticity seems complete, and it is hardly necessary to add this passage from the diary of Mary Gladstone (Mrs. Drew : “ He (Browning) told me about Mrs. Sutherland Orr (Leighton’s sister), and what an astonishing interpretation of him was her handbook.”

But immediately one turns to the *Handbook* itself, all sorts of difficulties crop up. Take, for instance, this very comment on *The Statue and the Bust*, certain details in which Browning himself had taken the trouble to correct. “ He (Browning) leaves the bust in the region of fancy, by stating that it no longer exists,” says Mrs. Orr, “ but he tells us that it was executed in ‘ Della Robbia ’ ware.” The meaning of the sentence is not very clear at first sight, but when one looks at it carefully it seems able to mean only this : “ Browning tells us that the bust is no longer there, and so we have to resort to our own fancy to supply a picture of it.” That is to say, if you go to Florence you will find that the bust has disappeared, as, indeed, Browning says it has. The only clue which Browning gives, by which we can judge what the bust looked like, is that it was executed in “ Della Robbia ” ware. Mrs. Orr leaves the reader quite clear on one point—that there *was* a bust once in the place, but that it is no longer there. But we happen to know—for Hardy has left on record the poet’s own words—that Browning invented the bust, that it never existed, and that Browning knew that it never existed. How then, if he put Mrs. Orr right on one historical error in the poem, did he come to leave this other uncorrected ? If Mrs. Orr’s testimony that the poet read her interpretation were not enough, we have other evidence on the

point. Mr. T. J. Wise once forwarded to Browning a letter from a reader who had been puzzled by something in the poem. Browning in his reply to Mr. Wise remarked that he had looked up Mrs. Orr's *Handbook* to see what she had to say on the point.

But here is something even more bewildering. The poem *Another Way of Love* has puzzled many readers. Consider the last stanza :

And after, for pastime,  
If June be refulgent  
With flowers in completeness,  
All petals, no prickles,  
Delicious as trickles  
Of wine poured at mass-time,—  
And choose one indulgent  
To redness and sweetness :  
Or if with experience of man and of spider,  
June use my June—lightning, the strong insect-ridder,  
And stop the fresh film-work,—why, June will consider.

Which Mrs. Orr paraphrases thus : “ She reminds him, however, that June may repair her bower, which his hand has rifled, and the next time consider which of the two courses she prefers : to bestow her flowers on one who will accept their sweetness, or use her lightnings to kill the spider who is weaving his films about them.” The lady, we see, has dismissed one lover and is debating with herself how she will behave next time—i.e. when next some lover sues. But it so happens that Browning had himself given an explanation of the stanza. Here it is. “ The lady, a passionate Italian, means, ‘ Whether I shall find a new lover and bestow on him all that you despise, and even more,—forgetting all else ; or whether I shall not rather bethink myself of taking a thorough revenge on you—that is for after-con-

sideration : you are not ' out of the wood ' yet." Now, the poem thus understood has an immeasurably greater dramatic value than as interpreted by Mrs. Orr : in fact, Mrs. Orr's interpretation creates a veritable anti-climax in the poem and makes almost a bathos of its ending. Once more we are left wondering why Browning took no notice of this mutilation.

We have seen Dr. Berdoo's interpretation of *Parting at Morning*. And it so happens that Browning himself gave the authentic interpretation for the benefit of " The Day's End Club " of Exeter. The last line of the poem runs :

And the need of a world of men for me,

and Browning writes : " It is his confession (the confession of the speaker in the poem) of how fleeting is the belief (implied in the first part<sup>1</sup>) that such raptures are self-sufficient and enduring—as for the time they appear." Now, Browning wrote this answer in 1889, and he did not refer his inquirers to Mrs. Orr's *Handbook*, though that was already in its third edition. Had the " Day's End Club " consulted Mrs. Orr ? It is not impossible, for Mrs. Orr's comment on the poem does not give much help—" *Parting at Morning* asserts the need of ' men ' and their ' world ' which is born again with the sunshine." But Browning, we have seen, set a high value on the *Handbook*, and on at least one occasion looked to see whether a particular difficulty referred to him by a correspondent had been solved by Mrs. Orr. It might be expected that on this occasion he would have followed the same course.

<sup>1</sup> I.e. in *Meeting at Night*.

In that case he would hardly have failed to communicate with Mrs. Orr, and she would have changed, i.e. expanded and altered, her comment in the next edition (which as a matter of fact appeared just before Browning's death). Nevertheless, many circumstances can be imagined which would explain that omission. The point is that in this discrepancy between Browning's explanation and Mrs. Orr's we have another argument against the complete authenticity of the *Handbook*.

It is very probable that Mrs. Orr's *Handbook* has ceased to be important—even though certainly it is still in fairly wide use. The question of its authenticity need not have delayed us, but that Mrs. Orr's work has to be considered as in some degree characteristic of her age. She takes up a quite definite attitude, in her *Handbook*, towards Browning's poetry—very much the same attitude as Nettleship. If then the authenticity of the book could be established, we should have to accept her account of the significance of Browning's work as being the poet's own account.

But from what has already been said it is clear that the *Handbook* need by no means be regarded as infallible. If serious discrepancies occur between the *Handbook* and the Poems, the problem will be for the reader of to-day, not to find some way of reconciling his reading with Mrs. Orr's, but to understand how it came about that Browning openly praised a book which gives demonstrably wrong interpretations of his work. The treatment of that problem is reserved for a later chapter, and what remains to be done here is to give examples of such discrepancies, selecting for this purpose interpretations by Mrs. Orr which seem characteristic of a



whole body of opinion rather than individual to herself.

A minor point may be noticed first. Browning enjoyed then—and still in many quarters enjoys—a reputation for wide and deep erudition. When this erudition is tested it is found that its width is more considerable than its depth, but in the Nineties it had not been subjected to tests except in connection with his translations from the Greek. Mrs. Orr, speaking of *Sordello*, says that Browning had prepared himself by studying all the chronicles of that period of Italian history which the British Museum supplied: “and we may be sure that every event he alluded to as historical is so in spirit, if not in the letter.” Now, the fact is that a careful study of the historicity of *Sordello* will show that Mrs. Orr was wrong, and overrated the accuracy of the poem—in the spirit as well as in the letter. This ascription of immense learning to the poet is of importance because beyond question it supported his authority as a thinker upon all subjects.

But much more important is the particular angle from which Mrs. Orr looks at the whole of the poet's work. She sees it as a body of ethical doctrine and as the expression of religious beliefs. While the poet was proclaiming from the housetops that his work was essentially dramatic—the utterances of imaginary persons and not of himself—in other words, that he was a psychologist—Mrs. Orr was telling the man in the street that Browning was a moral teacher. Of *Sordello* she says, “The intended lesson of the story is distinctly enforced in the last scene,” whereas if we turn to the text we find that Browning does not seek a lesson to be drawn from *Sordello's* life, but a psychological explanation of

Sordello's failure. "What made the secret of his past despair?" asks Browning: he does not go on to ask, "What lesson can we learn from the secret of his past despair?" In exactly the same way a whole series of dramatic monologues are described as "defences." For instance, *Fifine* is "a defence of inconstancy, or of the right of experiment in love"; *Bishop Blougram*, "a defence of religious conformity in those cases in which the doctrines to which we conform exceed our powers of belief but are not throughout opposed to them." But to this rule of Mrs. Orr's there is one exception. She takes *Christmas Eve* and *Easter Day* to be dramatic poems and not lessons. Why? Beyond question there were readers of that day, there are readers in this day, who cherish those two poems precisely because they give expression to their own religious beliefs. There may be two explanations of Mrs. Orr's willingness to treat the two poems as dramatic and psychological—and both explanations may hold good. The first is that Browning—as we know from Mrs. Browning's letters—had expressly stated that these two poems were not an expression of his own religious views. And the second is that the views expressed in them could not be reconciled with Mrs. Orr's own religious and philosophical views. For the Christianity of the two poems, especially of *Easter Day*, is largely orthodox, and Mrs. Orr was, if not an agnostic, at any rate distinctly not an orthodox Christian. Wherefore, if in reference to any particular poem she can interpret the text as the expression of some belief not orthodox, she will assign to that poem a didactic purpose. If she fails so to interpret it, the poem is described as dramatic. She ascribes to Browning in her introduction the

belief that "Christ is a spiritual mystery far more than a definable or dogmatic fact." Now, in *Christmas Eve* Christ appears as a visible fact and the speaker ends the poem by declaring his adherence to the Christianity of the Nonconformist tabernacle. So again, when Mrs. Orr comments on *A Death in the Desert* she finds that Browning is expressing his own views in the words of Saint John in those passages in which Saint John maintains that doubt is the test of faith and its preserver. But the Christology of the poem is said (or implied) by her to be dramatic, and is represented as unsoundly based (and here we may notice a comment by Nettleship on the same poem, that it "goes no single step in the direction of proving Christ's divinity as a dogma"). The whole trend of Mrs. Orr's work, so far as it is occupied with Browning's religious views, is towards the suggestion that he did not hold the Christian faith. Actually there is a substantial body of evidence in favour of supposing that he did (see *The Life of Robert Browning*, W. Hall Griffin and H. C. Minchin, pp. 294 following).

In the attitude taken up towards Browning's work by the main body of reviewers of the Fifties we remarked a curious anomaly—this, namely, that they failed to recognise in Browning a thinker who was in many ways representative of the age. And again those of the more prominent men of letters who in the Nineties had anything to say or write about Browning seem to us of to-day curiously blind to things in him which one might expect them to have admired or execrated. Do we find the same thing in the Browning Society commentators—in the quiet and thoughtful people who read him in vicarages and in comfortable middle-class villas

in the Nineties? In a certain measure we do. It is necessary to recall what they wanted to find in Browning. They wanted a man with a consoling and strengthening message—a man who believed in men; who believed that the world was not the creation of an Aristophanic God; who could uphold the code of conduct traditional in British middle-class homes—and if one article in that code seemed more important than another (then as now), it was that which concerned marriage and intercourse of the sexes generally. They wanted to find that kind of man in Browning, and because they wanted to find, they found. But while Browning, there is no doubt, considered that marriage was the fit consummation of romantic love, holding in that with the Victorians, he differed in not looking upon their code as absolute or final; and he could speculate on ways and times in which it might break down. *The Statue and the Bust* is a speculation of this kind: it horrified the readers of the Fifties. They exaggerated its importance: the Victorians of the Nineties probably underestimated it.

Consider for a moment one of the main themes of *The Ring and the Book*. That poem seems to our generation the work of “an infinitely respectable rebel,” yet it was in certain ways calculated rudely to shock the doctor, the solicitor, the Dean, the school-master and the literary-minded ship-owner of the Nineties. Those people must surely have found it difficult to approve of a Pope who reserved his highest praise for the woman who turned a sword against her husband’s breast. “Thou,” he says, addressing Pompilia:

Thou, patient thus, could’st rise from law to law,  
The old to the new, promoted at one cry

O' the trump of God to the new service, not  
To longer bear, but henceforth fight, be found  
Sublime in new impatience with the foe !  
Endure man and obey God : plant firm foot  
On neck of man, tread man into the hell  
Meet for him, and obey God all the more !

One is tempted to wander farther down that page because there is much in the thought there which seems to belong less to the years in which it was conceived—and the years in which it was praised—than to our own time.

How the fine ear felt full the first low word  
" Value life, and preserve life for My sake ! "  
Thou didst—how shall I say ?—receive so long  
The standing ordinance of God on earth,  
What wonder if the novel claim had clashed  
With old requirement, seemed to supersede  
Too much the customary law ? But, brave,  
Thou at first promptings of what I call God,  
And fools call Nature, didst hear, comprehend,  
Accept the obligation laid on thee,  
Mother elect, to save the unborn child,  
As brute and bird do, reptile and the fly,  
Ay and, I nothing doubt, even tree, shrub, plant  
And flower o' the field, all in a common pact  
To worthily defend the trust of trusts,  
Life from the Ever Living. . . .<sup>1</sup>

And that must have sounded strange, if she had been able to hear truly, to the lady who had just turned out of doors her housemaid who was carrying with her too evident signs of " an unfortunate affair " with the milkman. And to less inhuman persons than this there must have been much to ponder over, if

<sup>1</sup> Mrs. Orr's paraphrase of all this passage in her *Handbook* is particularly significant. Evidently she had learnt the value of the precept " Glissez, n'appuyez point "—" With Pompilia the right virtue is always employed for the good end. She is submissive where only her own life is at stake ; brave when a life within her own calls on her for protection."

they ever connected this and like passages in *The Ring and the Book* with *The Statue and the Bust* and with *The Flight of the Duchess*. As for *Fifine*, enough has already been said to show how sorely this perplexed the Browningites, and what desperate measures they took to explain it all away.

## CHAPTER V

### *THE NINETEEN-TWENTIES*

THE difficulty every critic meets of picking out what is characteristic of the poetical thought of a given age naturally becomes greater the nearer that age is to his own. It is enormous in the case of the Nineteen-twenties, not only because it is difficult for anyone to know what a forest is like as a whole when he is in the middle of it, but because this particular forest is so vast and contains so many different kinds of vegetation. It seems incredible that in this country any age could have shown more violently contrasted poetry than that of Sir Henry Newbolt and that of Miss Edith Sitwell or more violently contrasted critical methods than those of Professor Elton and those of Mr. I. A. Richards. And between these extremes and extending, so to speak, far and wide on each side of the line which joins them are innumerable gradations of types of poetic thought. Selection was therefore necessary for the purposes of the present chapter, and the process of selecting was inevitably determined by the personal limitations of the selector. Even when, fearfully and after long thought, a certain field had been marked out, the classifying and analysing of what it contained brought a multitude of new dangers. For the final result nothing is claimed except that certain tendencies presently to be named were real tendencies, even though the origin of them and the weight to be attached to them might fairly

be disputed. Thus there is no doubt that the tone of that body of poetry which revealed a general outlook upon life was pessimistic rather than optimistic, but how far this may have been due to the influence of Hardy, to the discoveries and speculations of science, or to a number of causes operating to produce in the whole community a feeling of disillusionment and bitterness, is a problem on which no one can yet speak with authority. Again, poets writing in that decade did on the whole attach a higher value than their predecessors to simplicity of language, to directness of expression and to conciseness. It is open to discuss how far that simplicity is genuine, and whether it was or was not successful in its reaction against the more opulent and heavily laden language of the Victorians. Once more, no one nowadays reads *The Ring and the Book*, and few poems are printed which cover more than one page of a book. Is this due to a weakness—for instance, are we less strong of heart and shorter of breath than Robert Browning?—or is it all to the good, because the particular things that have to be said now must be said shortly or not at all?

To questions of this sort—though not necessarily to these particular questions—some kind of answer will be offered. How precarious that answer is no one knows better than the writer. But something will have been gained which may help forward the general endeavour of this study, if the mere enumeration of important influences operating in the decade of the Twenties does not prove to have been quite unreliable.

During the first few years of the new century the output of books and articles on Browning continued in great volume. But after Mr. Chesterton's con-



tribution to the *English Men of Letters* series, the stream began to shrink rapidly, and by 1910 or thereabouts was reduced to a mere trickle. The centenary of the poet's birth brought, in 1912, a valuable contribution to criticism in the shape of Henry James's article in the *Quarterly Review*; and in Professor Elton's *Survey*, published in 1920, the treatment of Browning is no less wise, thorough and sympathetic than that which he accords to any other Victorian.

Browning continues to be read, but there is no Browning Society. Except by examination candidates, not very much is written about his poetry, and that little is not whole-hearted in praise. To compare him with Tennyson—an initiatory ceremony in the literary salons of the Nineties—is now a purely academic exercise. The editor of any review of good standing would not trouble to read beyond the title of a manuscript on “The Philosophy of Robert Browning” or “Robert Browning's Views on Parenthood” or “Browning's Physicians.” Not that the ghost of the Browning Society is entirely laid, though its corpse has been all but half a century in the tomb. It speaks in a passage like this, taken from a book published in 1923. The reference is to the tenth stanza of *Abt Vogler* (“All we have willed or hoped . . .”):

“Surely this is an immense declaration! One asks oneself, is it true? And if it is true, is it so only for the intellectual giant and the genius? Robert Browning asserts it as a truth for all! God is eternal! It is power in man, derived from the Divine itself, and we have no gauge by which to measure its relative value since, all unknown to her, the widow's farthing headed that

memorable subscription list two thousand years ago."

While Browning continues to be read and enjoyed by the inarticulate many, the attitude of the reviews of our day has been not always too friendly. Not that all critics without exception condemn him. Most of them are indifferent rather than hostile. Others, for instance Mr. F. L. Lucas, find much to praise, even if there is still more that they hate. A few praise him, not without reserve, but with the reservations implied rather than expressed. Mr. Osbert Burdett, the latest biographer of the Brownings, reminds himself that "Browning is the only modern poet whose range, humanity, humour, mastery of language and variety of gifts invited comparison with Shakespeare."

Browning is a Victorian, and there has been in the present century a strong reaction against the Victorians. But it is interesting to note that the special kind of hostility which characterises the attitude of some contemporary critics had found expression before the anti-Victorian reaction set in. This new hostility is directed not so much against those peculiarities of style—e.g. harshness of verse, obscurity, language, involution of thought—which had angered the critics of the Eighteen-fifties and Eighteen-sixties as against Browning's point of view, his attitude towards life. Here is an example taken from one of the earliest specimens of the new criticism (*Browning for Beginners*, by the Reverend T. Rain). The critic, who has many things to say in praise of the poet, cannot stomach his optimism. He contrasts the optimism and idealism of Browning with the despair and realism of Maxim

Gorki, from whom he quotes: "I have come from below, from the nethermost ground of life, where is nought but sludge and muck. . . . I am the truthful voice of life, the harsh cry of those who still abide down there and who have let me come up to bear witness to their sufferings." Mr. Rain comments:

"Would Browning have listened to such a voice? Would he even have heard it, this shriek of wildness and despair? I doubt if he would. His art so absorbed him that he had no time to look on commonplace life, far less lay its grim facts to heart. . . . Full well Browning knows there are victims. But the knowledge of this does not seem to disturb him; he nowhere writes as a man whom the thought of it has stricken to the heart; contriving to forget, he goes upon his way, cheerily singing—

"God's in His Heaven,  
All's right with the world.'"

And a little further comes this: "Sometimes . . . we lose patience and blaspheme. We incline to bid him 'shut up.'"

The nature and extent of the reaction against Browning is the main subject of this chapter, but, as in other chapters, so here it has been thought well to begin by noting in a general way some of the main tendencies exhibited by poetry as it developed in the Nineteen-twenties. And the three tendencies which are to be discussed here are these: First, a pessimistic trend of thought, strongly influenced by the philosophical implications which appeared to underlie the theories and suggestions of men of science; secondly, a revolt against analytic reason (logic)—or rather a new manifestation of a revolt, the begin-

nings of which, so far as poetry is concerned, must be dated at least as far back as the beginnings of the Romantic Movement ; thirdly, a movement proceeding in an exactly opposite direction from the last, and on that account to be referred to as Neo-Rationalism or Neo-Classicism.

By definition a pessimist is a man who has had to live with an optimist. Browning was an optimist with whom poets and critics had been living for upwards of half a century, so that the reaction against him was to be expected and may have been necessary. And, as we have already suggested, it is part of the general reaction against the whole point of view of the Victorian age. We have already noted that the whole manner of life of the Victorians has been held up to ridicule—their love of mahogany, horsehair, candelabra, crinolines ; the prudery which made them drape piano legs and call trousers “ indispensables ” ; their empty, lifeless idealism, their self-interest disguised as righteousness—in a word, their mixture of hypocrisy, cunning and obtuseness. A smug and stuffy age. That condemnation was not invented in the Twenties ; it was invented by Mr. G. B. Shaw,<sup>1</sup> and the later decade accepted with its many minds one man’s thesis and worked it out in detail. In this minutely particularised indictment of the Victorians the accusation of obtuseness is, for the moment, best worth examining. The Victorians, it is said, were wilfully blind to the evils which beset them. By dint of repetition they had convinced themselves that all was for the best in the best of all possible societies—and the most characteristic expression, the most frequently quoted expression of that obtuseness, is—

<sup>1</sup> A claim might be put in for Samuel Butler.

God's in His Heaven,  
All's right with the world.

Whence it follows we might expect that Browning would be singled out for attack in any reaction towards a pessimistic point of view.

Such a reaction has taken place. Of all the names of poets associated with the swing-over to pessimism, none is greater than that of Thomas Hardy. Not that he himself would admit that he was a pessimist. He even claimed to be a meliorist. That seems strange, even if we allow on reflection that he was not in the strict sense of the word a pessimist—that is to say, he had not formed for himself a systematic philosophy of the type named pessimist. In the looser sense of the word he was a pessimist, because the view of life and of man's nature reflected in his poetry is full of the darkest gloom. It is worth considering certain points in his view of life, because he has so strongly influenced modern poetry.

Careful though Hardy was to disavow a systematic philosophy, there do exist very close resemblances between his attitude—if we may use no more precise word than that—and the philosophy of Schopenhauer, resemblances, indeed, hardly less striking than those between Browning's attitude and Christian philosophy. It is not that Hardy borrowed his point of view or attitude from Schopenhauer, or that he grew up with Schopenhauer as Browning grew up with the Bible. There is a parallel to be drawn between Hardy and Mr. Shaw. Mr. Shaw's attitude in his *Quintessence of Ibsenism* has analogies with the philosophy of Nietzsche in spite of the fact that, when the *Quintessence* was written, its author had not read Nietzsche. So also Hardy was, we might almost say, a Schopenhauerian pessimist before he

had read Schopenhauer. And yet it is certain that he did at one time or another study Schopenhauer, and from that point onward the philosopher's influence on the poet was direct and considerable. The total effect which issued in his poems may perhaps be summed up by saying that he conceived of man as a thing of nought, an infinitesimal point against the stupendous background of the universe. Sometimes man is represented as wholly predetermined in all his actions, unable to choose between this or that. Yet this predetermination must not be taken as implying a reasoned plan in the working out of history. Then, as for God, if there is any God, he has forgotten earth and its inhabitants—and this perhaps through man's fault ; man may have severed himself from God. Or yet again God is perhaps created by man in his own image—a projection of himself designed to “ease his loaded heart.” Dethrone the man-created God, and what is left is no more than a blind, listless Will which knows nothing of pity or beauty. Yet in this point of view—all the more because it is not a philosophy—there are inconsistencies. Though anything like a reasoned plan is excluded, yet the listless Will works according to rote. Again, there is even—not indeed a gleam of hope, but something like a vague stain in one region of Hardy's dark sky. “Perhaps,” he says to the Will—

Perhaps thy ancient rote-restricted ways  
Thy ripening rule transcends ;  
That listless effort tends  
To grow percipient with advance of days,  
And with percipience mends.

And there are traces of an uneasy feeling concerning the reality of the time process which, had Hardy

been philosophising, would have forced him to reconsider his conception of the Will and its workings. For an instance, take this from *The Absolute Explains*, the date of which is 1922 :

Know, time is toothless, seen all through ;  
The Present, that men but see,  
Is phasmal : since in a sane purview  
All things were shaped to be  
Eternally.

Your " Now " is just a gleam, a glide  
Across your gazing sense :  
With me, " Past," " Future," ever abide,  
They come not, go not, whence  
They are never hence.

In fine, Time is a mock—yea, such !  
As he might well confess :  
Yet hath he been believed in much,  
Though lately, under stress  
Of Science, less.

Hardy, then, comes in—or perhaps it would be more correct to say, was invoked—to lend strength to the anti-Victorian tendency of the new century, and in particular to the tendency to react from Victorian optimism and belief in progress. But there have been, of course, many other influences at work to shape the literary thinking of our day. The last line of the poem just quoted reminds us that science has been a most powerful influence. It is worth noting a significant difference in the attitude towards science of poets in our day and in earlier times. Tennyson, we know, studied certain branches of science, not, indeed, with profound seriousness, but systematically. It is scarcely to be believed that any poet of our own day has relatively the same knowledge of contemporary developments in science

as Tennyson had in his earlier years. The reason is simple—there is infinitely more to study in every branch of science. Nevertheless, the poet can form for himself a notion of the direction in which scientific thought is moving. He has not enough special knowledge or technical equipment to read what the scientists write for other scientists, but he can be made aware through *œuvres de vulgarisation* of certain consequences for our view concerning man's life and destiny and concerning the nature of his understanding and his emotions, which seem to flow from the researches of the scientist. And he may borrow—he does not infrequently borrow—some of the language of the scientist—astronomer, chemist, physicist, biologist, psychologist. Lastly, his understanding and knowledge of what is being done varies from science to science. For example, Freud is—or seems—easier to assimilate than Einstein.

Though it is perilous work to try to measure the influence thus exercised by science upon poetical thought in this day, the task cannot be wholly shirked. One or two manifestations of that influence must be mentioned in the hope that they may be accepted as significant. Perhaps we might conveniently begin with the astronomer, because, for one thing, we are familiar with that contrast which poets have drawn between the insignificance of man and the vastness of the universe of stars, and, for another, it is astronomy or cosmology which of all kinds of science attracted to itself most powerfully the attention of all thinking persons in the decade which has just closed. But in the past there seemed to go along with this realisation of man's insignificance two assumptions: first, that somehow the



earth, or at least the solar system, occupied a central position in the universe ; and secondly, that man was in some sense the crowning achievement of creation. (There were also theological assumptions with which for the moment we are not concerned.) The astronomers, mathematicians and physicists of our own day have come near measuring the full extent of the universe and determining its constitutive elements ; and in terms of time and space that universe has grown so vast as to defy an imagination which has difficulty in attaching much reality—or significance—even to a period of a thousand years, and is merely stunned when the astronomer begins to deal in millions of light-years. But that in itself—this growth of the extent of the universe—is of little importance in comparison with other pronouncements of science. It has become certain that astronomically the solar system is not the centre of the universe but an insignificant cluster of bodies whirling on the edge of a far vaster system. The dream that the other heavenly bodies outside our solar system could be inhabited has gone, since life, as we understand life, must be impossible in worlds in which the very atoms cannot keep their heads. More than this, one great scientist had propounded the question whether life itself might be no more than a disease of matter in its old age. *That* was what had become of the assumption that man is creation's highest achievement. Indeed, one might not be beside the mark in asking whether in the new picture of the universe which modern science had revealed there was room for anything which could be called highest achievement. The words seem robbed of meaning in a universe capable of being represented as a gigantic clock which, once wound

up, is slowly running down and can never be wound up again.

Turn now to quite a different field—to analytical psychology. We have come to believe—it is reflected in our daily talk—that the mind of man has two realms, the conscious and the unconscious (or sub-conscious). The conscious—the realm of what we may loosely call self-directed endeavour—is small in comparison with the realm of the unconscious, whence forces of incalculable potency are for ever striving to thrust their way into the conscious realm with results too often disastrous to the individual's health and happiness. Often within the realm of the conscious these forces of the unconscious, primeval lusts and fears, masquerade as virtues or reasonable ideas ; but by careful analytical study their mask is torn away. Man's inner life tends to be viewed as a bundle of " complexes "—" systems of connected ideas with a strong emotional tone and a tendency to produce actions of a certain definite character "—as they have been defined. And one of the greatest of analytical psychologists has suggested that the Ego itself is no more than a complex. So may we learn to-day to doubt the one thing which it had been left us to doubt—our own identity, ourselves. It is true enough that the analytical psychologist holds out the hope that if we accept his views he can improve our chances of health and happiness—but at the price of a determinist philosophy and the loss of our identity. Nor do we find any comfort if we turn from him to the Behaviourist, for he also is a rigid determinist, and he will tell us that we are no more than possibilities of reaction—mere trigger-mechanisms or penny-in-the-slot machines. If thought exists, it

is not worth troubling about, and words serve but as signals.

Now, clearly the poet can accept the doctrine that life is a disease of matter in its old age. A latter-day Baudelaire could make poetry out of that, and the old title *Fleurs du Mal* might continue to serve. Such a poetry, again, would not be much gloomier than *Ecclesiastes*. After all, there is nothing new in the thought that the universe is unfriendly to man, or at best so little interested in him that in all his aspirations and sufferings he does but disquiet himself in a vain shadow. Yet when the worst has been said and has been accepted concerning man's place in the physical universe, men we remain, and to us our concerns matter intensely. We can say and believe that, if the universe is immense and sinister, even more immense is the courage which accepts and challenges its hostility—all this on condition that on one side, at any rate, we do not form part of the physical universe. But destroy that condition, and how can any faith in himself continue in a man who is convinced that courage itself and faith itself are no more than physical reactions capable of being measured in the same kind of way as we measure, for instance, an electric potential? Who can have courage to say he is captain of his soul if he really believes that he has no soul?

But, we may say, is it not possible that science has fallen into error in the past? Are yet new philosophical interpretations of the universe to be ushered in by the physicists and mathematicians? On the extreme verge of the decade there is some justification for asking that question, since the public have had broadcast to them the doctrine that in the physical universe examined in the light of the latest

mathematical research there is no justification to be found for a philosophic determinism. But to follow up this line of thought would carry us too far away from our immediate purpose.

The sole instrument of science is the analytic reason, and it has always been open to challenge the efficacy of this instrument for discovering the truth about life or for measuring the value of life. And certainly the challenge has been sounded. It was, indeed, sounded many years ago—it is an eternal challenge on the lips of all men who have seen so many disastrous consequences flowing from the analytical reasoning as that has been employed not so much by students of physical science as by statesmen, theologians and economists. For these also claim to employ the tool of analytical reason. The challenge, then, is sounded in every field of human activity, but our concern is more particularly with the field of poetic thought. And in that field the loudest and clearest challenge was uttered by the Romantic writers and critics. About their theories there will be something to be said when the third main literary tendency of the Twenties comes under consideration—the Neo-Classical Movement, which is also an Anti-Romantic Movement. The manifestation of the protest against analytic reason (or intellectualism) especially characteristic of the Nineteen-twenties is not a kind of Romanticism at all. It is not easy to label. On one side it operates as a revived interest in mysticism and in certain characteristic attitudes of the Metaphysicals of the seventeenth century. Or again, without any special or express reference to any former type of poetical thought achievement, it holds that poetry and thought have nothing to do with one another—that although

a poem which contains reasoning and explanation may be a poem, the accuracy of the reasoning and the adequacy of the explanation give no measure of its value as poetry. On yet another side it strives to recover the simplicity, the freshness of outlook and the directness of childhood. For instance, one of the best known of contemporary critics says of Mr. De La Mare that "half his poems are really bred out of his perpetual recovery of childhood, when reason was in abeyance and the 'facts of life' not apprehended, and all things in their nakedness assailed the spirit and the senses with their full beauty and mystery."

These points must be developed a little farther.

Simplicity and directness are the two outstanding characteristics of much of the poetry written in the decade. But it must not be thought that simplicity and obscurity are incompatible. Obviously, they are compatible. An Englishman may talk with the utmost simplicity about roses to an Esquimaux and will be utterly unintelligible to his hearer. So also when the mystic poet speaks of his *Rosa Mystica* in the simplest language most men will fail to understand him. A child speaks very simply to a grown-up and is impatient because he is not understood. And this difficulty of the grown-up may come of the very fact that the child's perception is clearer and in a sense truer than his own. But now let us consider the following criticism of Blake which has appeared in a weekly review of our own time :

"His work is no latter day Talmud to which the initiate alone holds the key ; his readers should give up hope of 'interpreting' and explaining and rest content to 'look into his pictures,' and let the cadences of his poetry saturate their minds, till their

sympathies have extended from the enjoyment of obvious beauties and gradually embraced the less obvious system on which those beauties depend. A doctrine may then become clear. . . .”

Reflecting upon that, one may come to distinguish between two kinds of obscurity in poetry. The one is of the child who would be shocked and hurt if you told him he was not relying on reason : if he could find the language, he would reply that he was being perfectly reasonable, and that anyone but a block-head would understand him. The other is the obscurity which our critic attributes to Blake—the obscurity of a man who has consciously abjured reasonableness, and who would be more annoyed than pleased if you claimed to understand him—not because he despises understanding or prides himself on being obscure, but simply because one can no more understand poetry than one can smell algebra. And in some such attitude of mind we find the origin of a great deal in modern poetry which makes *Sordello* seem like the acme of lucidity. In most cases the language itself is simple enough :

A wall of cactus guards the virgin sound—  
Dripping through the sword-edged leaves  
The wayward milking  
Of your mental stalactites  
On the strung bells of music,  
Arrests the moment,  
Petrifies the air.

The poet, naturally, cannot abjure thought, and he need not abjure logic, but the thought and the logic are not of the essence of poetry—it is his attitude towards thought which matters. In modern criticism we find such a phrase as “the emotional apprehension

of thought," and such a judgment as "In Donne . . . we find the first consciousness of felt thought." These utterances themselves will not be too clear to every reader, but perhaps it is not misleading to say that the position of mind we are now considering is one which in a proposition of Euclid admires the style without troubling itself about the correctness of the demonstration and proof. In other words, poetry and analytic reason are thought of as working in different spheres, and if these intersect they do not confuse their boundaries.

But now we advance another step in the development of this position. It might be supposed that, as poetry seen from this angle has no concern with analytic reason (with intellectualism), neither is it concerned with the truth. But the supposition would not be permitted by these poets. On the contrary, they would maintain that poetry has at command a far more potent instrument than has science for arriving at the truth, and that is intuition. Here is a characteristic proposition. " 'The Phœnix and The Turtle' . . . is the direct embodiment through symbols which are necessarily dark, of a pure, comprehensive and self-satisfying experience, which we may call, if we please, an immediate intuition into the hidden nature of things." Shakespeare, in other words, has transcended reason. And in the essay from which the quotation is taken it is maintained that "the nature of Shakespeare's poetry is the nature of poetry." Here, indeed, we must notice an important distinction. A characteristic idea attributed to the Romantic writers is that they oppose intuition to reason—the two working as it were in complete independence. But there is another possible view of intuition which might be characteristic

of the mystics—namely, that in the progress of the soul towards the ultimate truth intuition begins where reason leaves off. The poet's intuition, that quality or faculty in virtue of which he is properly called a poet, is the same as, or is related to, the vision of the mystic at prayer. The relation between the poetic and the mystic experience has been elaborated in a book which attracted much attention—*Prière et Poésie*, by the Abbé Henri Brémond, the latest exposition of the *vates sacer* theory of the poet's function—a vates who prophesies, but teaches nothing and instructs no one. Stripped of all intention to inform, to instruct, to convert, poetry becomes Pure Poetry, or Poetry for Poetry's Sake.

"Poetry for Poetry's Sake" is the title of Professor A. C. Bradley's Inaugural Lecture from the Oxford Chair of Poetry, delivered, indeed, in the opening years of this century, but representing an outlook which is manifested in much of the poetry of the Twenties. Obviously suggested by the better-known phrase, "Art for Art's sake," it is safer than that—at least it is less likely to be rejected by poets and critics in this country.<sup>1</sup> Adopting, then, this phrase for the moment, one may now proceed to inquire what can be deduced from it as to the technique of poetry. Obviously, in the first place, in poetry which does not inform or instruct or persuade but has for its office to produce in the reader a special kind of experience, there can be no completely valid separation of technique (i.e. form) from subject-matter (i.e. content). Technique and subject-matter will be no more than two aspects of the same thing, that will be the view of those who

<sup>1</sup> It has been strongly attacked by Mr. I. A. Richards in his *Principles of Literary Criticism*.



accept the doctrine of Poetry for Poetry's Sake. Others who do not follow that banner will remark that the poets who do not wish their poetry to be understood, who do not analyse and syllogise, are precisely the poets who expend the greatest amount of labour upon the technical side of the work and are proud to call themselves conscientious artists. To be accused of writing *vers libre* ought to be considered by them the bitterest irony, since they have only exchanged old shackles for newer and heavier. This was necessary for them. For establishing communication (one hesitates to say "for expressing themselves") they cannot rely upon all the same means as their predecessors: they are confined to the sounds of the poetry and to the associations of the words. Quotation will best illustrate these points. Miss Edith Sitwell is speaking of Miss Marianne Moore's poem *Black Earth*. This poem is about an elephant—or perhaps one should say this is an elephant-poem—but there also comes into it some notion of "the animal state of consciousness shaping itself from within." Miss Sitwell comments:

"Notice how admirably her technique in this case is fitted to the subject. It conveys the great lumbering gait, and though the lines are short, the huge size of the subject. And this is done by a technical device which Miss Moore uses a thousand times in other poems . . . the trick of ending lines with such words as 'of,' 'and,' or 'a,' indeed, even the trick of ending a line in the middle of the word."

Of another poem she says:

"The dissonances which end the lines in the place of rhymes give the discontent of the subject, its

groping in the blackness, without finding what it is groping for. May I ask you to notice the curious effect that the alternation of the dull muted r's and sounded r's have in this poem? They give the effect of the hoarse voice of an animal."

Such an attitude towards technique seems like the natural consequence of a doctrine that poetry exists wholly in its own right. For if a poem is something *sui generis*, it may be assumed that it must, like "the animal state of consciousness" in Miss Sitwell's critique, "shape itself from within." The only sense in which the final, shaped product can legitimately be described as free verse, is that it has not had its shape imposed from without.

"Means of communication" were mentioned above, and the chief were said to be the sound of the verse and the associations aroused by words. Some modern poets, it is true, have attempted to find a third in typography. Mallarmé's *Jamais un Coup de Dés n'abolira le Hasard* has found imitators in this country and in America. To a certain extent such devices are pure freakishness, but in so far as new developments in technique demand a special kind of reading, special typographical devices may become necessary.<sup>1</sup> On this point, however, there is no time or occasion to dwell. A word or two must be said of association. The quotations from Miss Sitwell illustrate the extent to which certain poets rely upon association: even more suggestive quotations might have been taken from the same writer's

<sup>1</sup> Of one such experiment it is written by an admirer: "Parentheses he uses for sotto voce pronunciation; or, if they occur in the middle of a word, as in 'the taxi-man p(ee)ps his whistle,' they denote a certain quality of the letters enclosed—here the actual sharp whistling sound between the opening and closing (the two p's) of the taxi-man's lips."

book on Pope. But it is in reading the mystic poets that we are most vividly reminded how extensive a use of association was forced upon them by the very nature of their thought. If you transcend the syllogism, one might say, you must be borne upward on the wings of association. In a moment of vision I see what is ineffable in the sense that no familiar method of description will serve to communicate my experience. Here those things which to logic are contradictory and irreconcilable are merged in a higher unity. My only hope of evoking in you some part of the effect of that vision is by finding the word or group of words whose associated images and emotions will work as an evocatory charm. My words cease to have their everyday commonplace references : they become symbols. I say the words "rosa mystica" ; and that will grow up in your imagination, which is present to mine. Other words which seem to be credited with that influence by the mystics are : light, darkness, abyss, fullness, clearness. Not words only nor groups of words have this evocatory or associative power, but also and in a special degree particular rhythms and cadences. And, indeed, it is very natural that the poetry of the mystic should of all poetry approach most closely to music.

But the associative or evocatory aspect of language has been of interest not only to the mystics or to those poets like Baudelaire, who, far removed from mysticism, yet hold the doctrine that "*La poésie n'a pas d'autre but qu'elle-même,*" but also to that type of thought which became prominent in the Twenties and might be called Neo-Classicism. It is by technique as much as by anything that this poetry is different from other classical or classicist

poetry. The technique appears to have been strongly influenced by the spread of a new interest in psychology (possibly the strongest formative influence upon literature in this decade) and particularly the psychology of the unconscious, or semi-conscious mind. And the style is erudite in its allusiveness : or, if that is a wrong description, the style relies for its effect upon a certain degree (a pretty high degree) of erudition in the listener. But for the purposes of the present inquiry the most interesting characteristics of Neo-Classicism are the hostility to Romantic poetry and Romantic thought, which the name itself implies, and still more the attack upon certain kinds of scientific and philosophical thinking. Concerning the hostility to Romance not much need be said. The Romantics are accused of having lost touch with life and carried men's minds away into an unreal region—an unhealthy region in which disproportion and hysteria hold sway. From Romanticism we are called back to that Greek ideal of harmony, proportion, control, to a world of common sense and decorum. But perhaps the most serious accusation brought against the Romantics is that they failed in point of sensibility. And since sensibility had been the great merit of seventeenth-century poets such as Donne and the Metaphysicals, we find the Neo-Classics, like the believers in Pure Poetry, holding these poets up for our special admiration. "The poets of the seventeenth century . . . possessed a mechanism of sensibility which could devour any kind of experience." But far more significant is the challenge to certain types of scientific thought sounded by the Neo-Classics—and sounded in the name of good stout sense and logical thinking, not in the name

of the mystic's transcendent vision of the truth. Consider what Professor Babbitt has to say about psycho-analysis: "The Freudian then proceeds to develop what may be true of the hysterical degenerate into a complete view of life." Again, of the mechanistic philosophy of science he says it cannot satisfy "the true positivist" because it involves factors that are "infinite and therefore beyond calculation."

The swerve away from Romanticism takes a different form in the critical theory of Mr. I. A. Richards. That critical theory is based in great part upon psychological research, and it expressly abjures metaphysics, a type of thought which he considers as only likely to lead its followers into a wilderness where they will die of inanition. In a sense, then, he might be expected not to take much interest in those implications of pessimism which many poets and critics have developed out of the thoughts of the men of science—physicists, biologists and analytical psychologists. Starting from a purely psychological basis, he judges a poem according to its effect of helping us or of hindering us in building up the organisation of our experience—or, in other words, in raising or lowering our standard of response. In loose language, his position is that poetry must be praised or condemned according as it helps or hinders us in our conduct of life. If it were permitted still more loosely to represent this as a theory that good poetry makes for the happiness of ourselves—individual and community, we should have Mr. Richards starting out from modern psychology and Professor Irving Babbitt, who has travelled on a longer road from the Nicomachean Ethics, meeting and shaking hands.

Here, at the risk of a certain amount of repeating or overlapping, it may be advisable to build up what is little more than a note upon the influence of analytical psychology on the poetry of the Twenties, since, as has already been said, that was probably the strongest formative influence which can be discerned. From the nature of the case that influence has been even more powerful in fiction than in poetry. To some extent the influence has been direct, to some extent indirect. In its indirect action it appears as the influence of other literatures—notably of Russian fiction; but the direct action is probably more important. It was certain to operate so soon as psychology renounced the sphygmometer and the æsthesiometer in favour of the analytic methods of Freud and Jung, simply because Freud and Jung interested themselves in the growth and development of consciousness and its relation to the sub-conscious. For it began to occur to novelists and poets that the obscure mechanisms of the mind—those which hover at the threshold of full consciousness—might not only provide them with a vast new subject-matter, but, a far more original and daring thought, might actually be harnessed to a literary purpose. Thus some of the new poetry could almost be called a kind of psychological experimentation. Something has been already said on this point when association and evocation were in discussion. But there is something more—there is the spectacle of the poet eavesdropping at that mysterious door which shuts off his conscious mind from his sub-conscious and noting in his book the confused and nonsensical babble that he hears from within—catching, also, those lingering, slowly dispersed echoes which the consciously uttered word

awakens on the other side of the threshold. And this note on the influence of psychology may end by remarking that the new technique was made easier for those who wrote in the Nineteen-twenties by the dazzlingly original researches into assonances, dissonances, cross rhythms and so on carried out and practically applied by Gerard Manley Hopkins so long ago as the Sixties of the last century—in the days when Browning was in *The Ring and the Book* writing blank verse which shocked his hearers but might perhaps suggest to a more enlightened generation that in a dim kind of way he also was aware of new and quite different prosodies.

Our review of three main tendencies amounts shortly to this. There has been a reaction against Victorian ideals and achievements in poetry accompanied by a special kind of pessimism and disillusionment which derives at least a large part of its strength from the recent discoveries and speculations of the scientists. Poetical thought has reacted in different ways under pressure of this pessimism and disillusionment. Some have declared that poetry has nothing to do with science, ethics, metaphysics, but exists in its own right and spins its own world, as it were, out of itself. Others say that while science and philosophy work in one region and poetry in another, it is in the region of poetry, and by the means of which poetry disposes, that the ultimate truth is to be found. Yet a third group challenges science and philosophy on their own ground and, while maintaining close and intimate touch with possible realities, finds its own interpretation of these. More shortly the first group say that science is irrelevant, the second that it is unimportant, and the third that it is wrong. All have

strongly manifested that interest in the foundations and the beginnings of the workings of consciousness which forms the special field of psychology, and all have been influenced either in their subject-matter or in their technique or in both by the work of psychologists.

Following upon the procedure of earlier chapters, we have to consider next how Browning stands out against this background, and what the critics have had to say about him. Or perhaps it will be more convenient to start with a general statement on that last point—what the critics have had to say about him. They have had very little to say about him, but it is clear that they are still a little puzzled. One calls him “exuberant and greedy”; another says he is both admirable and insufferable; conceited and self-assertive. A third describes him as a robust and bustling casuist full of eager, mundane curiosity. But there is a most slender basis upon which to erect any generalisations. In other words, the critics will not be found to give much help in linking Browning to his background in this decade.

Let us begin by repeating a point already made, that this age laughs at the Victorians and that Browning is assumed to be a characteristic Victorian. And in a day which is paying so heavy a price for the tigerish brilliance of Mr. Lytton Strachey by having to endure all his jackals, it is curious that no book has been written about Browning in what might be expected to pass for the style or treatment of *Eminent Victorians*. Perhaps we may find the germs of Stracheyism in such stray utterances as this of Mr. Aldous Huxley—“the poetry of that infinitely respectable rebel, that profoundly Anglican worshipper of passion, Robert Browning.” More



Stracheyesque are references to peculiarities in the person or dress of Browning—"Noted for his unfailingly immaculate lemon-yellow gloves." And yet what a rich material lies here neglected! By what mercy of Providence has it happened that no one has yet worked up a complete biography from it? There are not only the lemon-yellow gloves, there is the diet of potatoes, the loud harsh voice, the habit of placing himself in disagreeable bodily proximity to the person with whom he was speaking and puffing and blowing in that person's face; the disappointment at not being invited to the Jubilee celebrations in the Abbey; the dinners with duchesses; the removal from Warwick Crescent to De Vere Gardens; the defence of Pen's paintings of the nude; the shocked horror at George Sand's entourage—and a score of other delights. Mr. F. L. Lucas did, indeed, resuscitate an unfriendly remark—"Who is that too-exuberant financier?"—and Mr. Shanks repeoples the old mare's nest of negro or Jewish origins. From a whole biography in the new manner we have been spared. And yet, as a matter of fact, all these things *are* significant, and an attempt will be made in later chapters to unfold their significance.

Not only Victorian, but an optimist, a man who thought that all was right with the world, blind to the misery and suffering which surrounded him on all sides. Or perhaps he was insincere in his optimism—perhaps not consciously or deliberately insincere, but deceiving himself. He shouted and banged out his optimism in an effort to drown the unpleasant truths which his inner consciousness kept whispering to him. And yet it is curious that the critics of his optimism should have been blind to certain parts of

Browning's thought. Two examples of the blindness may be given. The first of these is a very obvious example—the isolating from their context of these so often quoted lines—

God's in His Heaven,  
All's right with the world.

That Browning was not ignorant of suffering and misery ought to be clear enough from the rest of the poem—or from the single episode in *Pippa* from which the lines are taken. They are taken from the scene in which the main characters are Ottima and Sebald. Sebald has just murdered Ottima's husband, and none of the more sordid elements in the intrigue are omitted. Moreover, the girl who utters the lines has hanging over her head a plot which is to send her to Rome in order that she may there become a prostitute—"at Rome the courtesans perish off every three years and I can entice her thither—have indeed begun operations already." Once more, then, it is clear that Browning was not blind to evil. Whether he wrongly analysed it is another matter. The other example concerns perhaps an even broader issue. Critics maintain that Browning's creed of the immense importance of individual man in the total scheme of things cannot be squared with what science teaches of the cosmic insignificance of man. The inference seems to be that if he had read Einstein or Jeans he would have changed his views. But Browning's own contemporaries were also saying that man was insignificant in comparison with the heavens. In fact, Hamlet, in fact, the prophets of the Old Testament, had suspected that man was a thing of no account

The insignificance is only a question of degree, and it is not likely that Browning would have been perturbed if he had thought that humanity was merely a moment's episode in the countless drama of astronomical time. His answer—for he did make an answer—can be opposed to scientists of this day, just as much as to the scientists of the Eighteen-seventies—and again, whether it is a complete answer, it is not here relevant to discuss. He begins by saying that when he examined himself to discover what were the things which he could say that he knew, he found only two—his own existence (including all that he thought and felt) and the existence of something outside himself—

I have questioned and am answered. Question, answer pre-  
suppose  
Two points : that the thing itself which questions, answers,—is,  
it knows ;  
As it also knows the thing perceived outside itself—a force  
Actual ere its own beginning, operative through its course,  
Unaffected by its end . . .  
What before caused all the causes, what effect of all effects  
Haply follows,—these are fancy. Ask the rush if it suspects  
Whence and how the stream that floats it had a rise, and where  
and how  
Falls or flows on still ! What answer makes the rush except that  
now  
Certainly it floats and is, and, no less certain than itself,  
Is the everyway external stream that runs through shoal and  
shelf,  
Floats it onward, leaves it—may be—wrecked at last . . .  
. . . May be ! mere surmise not knowledge : much conjecture  
styled belief,  
What the rush conceives the stream means through the voyage  
blind and brief.

These lines may read more like a page from a metaphysical treatise than a poem, but the point of view

cannot be confuted by remarking that it is such a very small rush and such a very large stream—or even that there is only one very little rush in an illimitable stream. As a matter of fact, the thought expressed in the passage is modern, though the poem (*La Saisiaz*) is more than half a century old. (In honesty it must be added that the main thought of the whole poem could not be called modern.) And as optimism is here in question, it is relevant to quote a few more lines. Browning—who in this poem is undoubtedly speaking *in propria persona*—considers what results accrue if he is committed to the belief that while all that he sees around him is an illusion, his own joys and sorrows remain real :

Still,—with no more Nature, no more Man as riddle to be read,  
Only my own joys and sorrows now to reckon real instead—  
I must say—or choke in silence—“ Howsoever came my fate,  
Sorrow did and joy did nowise,—life well weighed,—preponderate.”

The new experiments made by recent poets in the technique—especially in the prosody—of poetry brought about a great interest in the work of Gerard Manley Hopkins, whom at least one critic of repute has called the greatest poet of his age : and his age was the second half of the last century. The hint has already been given that certain features of Browning's technique might be explained by supposing, not—as has hitherto been supposed—that they were due to a defective sense of melody and rhythm, but to a vague feeling about for new paths in which Hopkins was already walking. Browning's work on this side has been treated in a new and sympathetic way by Professor Elton in his *Survey*, and the points which he has made there wait to be

developed and treated more comprehensively by some critic more competent than the present writer. Still it remains true that Browning would have rejected emphatically the doctrine of Poetry for Poetry's Sake. On this aspect of his work we need not linger except to suggest that no one of his own time experimented more widely and freely than Browning, and that this in itself must have helped on the development of a new attitude in poets towards questions of technique. At the same time his failures in this matter—which cannot be denied by any serious critic—and his deliberate subordination of sound to sense would win him short shrift from any critic to-day who, fresh from Gerard Hopkins or Edith Sitwell, sat down to read *Asolando*. That does not seem to have happened.

The obscurity of Browning's poetry was a stumbling-block, even to his most favourable critics, from 1840 almost up to the present time. But in our own day those who admire Mr. Joyce, Miss Gertrude Stein, Mr. T. S. Eliot and the Sitwells can hardly condemn him on this count. They cannot object to obscurity in poetry. There is, however, in this matter a difference between Browning and the moderns. Robert Browning tried to be lucid, and was often surprised when his readers complained of his obscurity. He thought lucidity a virtue: the moderns do not. In other words, whereas Browning really did desire to be understood, many poets of the Twenties would have felt disappointed, if not insulted, if their readers claimed or even attempted to understand them. Therefore, although they cannot attribute it as a fault to Browning that he is obscure, they can say that his obscurity is of the wrong kind.

Two qualities so much prized in our own day do not characterise very much of Browning's work, though they are certainly not always absent. These are directness and economy of style. It is not unusual to hear that the day of long poems is over. If that were true (and it is not) it would help to explain the neglect of Browning in certain circles. He is long-winded and he is cumbersome in much of his work. He uses up over a thousand lines of blank verse in *Red Cotton Nightcap Country* before he really gets to grips with his story. *Sordello* is nearly as bad. Even *Christmas Eve* begins in the middle. Like a kitten with a mouse he scampers round and round his subject with occasional feints and rushes towards it for a long time before he makes his final pounce. What moderns require in a poet is the speed and certainty of a flash of lightning. It is not always that Browning fails in that respect. Some of his narratives are models in story-telling, for instance, *The Pied Piper of Hamelin* or *The Flight of the Duchess*. And in economy of means to an end it would be difficult to quote anything better than *My Star*, *Porphyria's Lover*, *The Heretic's Tragedy* and a score at least of the lyrics of his best period.

Nor can it be said that naïveté or a child-like freshness of outlook prevail in his poetry. It is rather a poetry with the outlook of a man of the world. Perhaps there are things in *Pippa Passes*, especially in what has been put into the mouth of Pippa herself, which exhibit something like naïveté, but even this claim might be seriously disputed. On the other hand, two points are worth making here, though it does not fall within the scope of this study to develop them. The first is that a great deal of

what passes for simplicity nowadays is probably in a high degree artificial. This perhaps applies even more to painting than to poetry. And, secondly, much evidence is now available for a belief that children are not so very child-like after all.

It will not be convenient in this place to inquire of the admirers of mysticism what judgment they would pass on Browning, since that is to form the subject of a later chapter. At first sight a favourable judgment could not be expected, but actually there are elements in his work which in an age that has so much to say of Donne and Crashaw and George Herbert might have been expected to attract attention if only by their incongruity with the rest of his work—especially with that part of it which tempted one critic of the Twenties to call him “a robust and bustling casuist” and another of an earlier date to say that all his poetry was summed up in the line—“*Bang, whang, whang, goes the drum, tootle-te-tootle the fife.*”

If not a mystic, then a Romantic—that seems to be the conclusion arrived at by at least one contemporary critic. It appears to be more than ever difficult to discover what the name Romantic implies, or at least to make up all the implications into one parcel. Perhaps the characteristics of the Romantic poets to which most attention is now being given are their depreciation of the understanding (analytic reason), their belief in the sacredness of the emotions, their impatience of restraint and order, and their shrinking from the realities of life. And if these qualities do make up the essence of Romanticism, it is further assumed that they are all to be found in Browning. For instance, Dean Inge has called him a misologist, and Professor Irving Babbitt

sees in him a clear example of the poet whose emotional values are all awry. In this critic's judgment Browning has abjured right reason, is flaccid in his spirituality, formless in his verse, and does not attempt to control his emotions or observe decorum. But so far from believing in the sacredness of the emotions or the essential good-heartedness of man (as Rousseau is said to have done), Browning believed in "The Corruption of Man's Heart." He believed in the sacredness of only one emotion, namely, love. And when the special characteristics of love, as Browning understood that word, are examined, they are found to make up something very different from love as Shelley, for instance, understood it. Browning's love is refined away until it almost ceases to have any tinge of desire in it. Love consoles us, explains life, keeps us alive. It is not the contrary or the opposite of reason, nor, on the other hand, does its work begin where reason leaves off. If it can be compared with intuition, then it must be with the intuition of Bergson rather than of the mystics, since it is not a power by which we apprehend the ultimate truth, but a power which enables us to be in sympathy with our surroundings, to "get inside" our world. It is distinct from reason in the sense that a man may aim at perfecting his reason and may at the same time eschew love—and the whole of *Paracelsus* is a picture of such an attempt. Paracelsus found that to eschew love was fatal, and Sordello found that only by love can the man of genius bring himself to acquiesce in the limits which time and space and physical disabilities in general impose upon the exercise of his powers. In one of the not many poems in which Browning avowedly speaks in his own person, he



cries that in the world, as God has made it—if only we could see it—"All is beauty : and knowing this is love," with which may be compared what Paracelsus says, "In my own heart love had not been made wise." Gathering up these and other indications, we may suppose that, though in Browning's mind love and reason are distinct, there is between them a harmony, as it were, pre-ordained. The special point which it is relevant to insist upon here is that love, so far from being something formless or impatient of restraint, is precisely that which imposes a measure upon man's powers—a μέτρον. How far such a conception is self-consistent—that is to say, how far it is immune against the attacks of the logician—is another question. It is enough to notice that it is a conception only with great difficulty to be reconciled with the attitude which Professor Irving Babbitt, for instance, regards as an essential characteristic of the romantic imagination.

When all Browning's faults have been recounted, his critics remember as the chief of his virtues the acuteness of his psychological insight ; his power of analysing motive, for instance, or, more broadly, his keen understanding of the way in which men's minds work. He knew how the mind of a worldly prelate moved when he was defending himself against a second-rate journalist ; how the mind of a spiritualist charlatan works, the mind of a painter or bishop of the Renaissance, of a Hellenistic poet and thinker—of a hundred men and women of different types. What is curious is that a generation like our own, so interested in the psychological novel, should not have taken note of the special character of the Browning psychology. It was Swinburne who first perceived that special character (see page 52), and we

have seen how Mr. Shaw compressed the same criticism into an epigram. And yet Browning created characters—the Caliban, whom Mr. Shaw thought untrue to life, really does insist on coming to life ; so does Bishop Blougram ; so does Fra Lippo Lippi. But the truth is that Browning, in spite of all appearances, does not as a rule probe deep—not so deep as Hardy or Proust or Dostoevsky. Nor has he much to say of the part played by the unconscious in the workings of the mind. A trace may be found here and there :

Underneath rolls what Mind may hide, not tame,  
 An element which works beyond our guess,  
 Soul, the unsounded sea—whose lift of surge  
 Spite of all superstition, lets emerge  
 In flower and foam, Feeling from out the deeps  
 Mind arrogates no mastery upon—  
 Distinct indisputably. Has there gone  
 To dig up, drag forth, render smooth from rough  
 Mind's flooring,—operosity enough ?  
 . . . But Soul's sea,—drawn whence,  
 Fed how, forced whither,—by what evidence  
 Of ebb and flow, that's felt beneath the tread,  
 Soul has its course 'neath Mind's work overhead,—  
 Who tells of, tracks to source the founts of Soul ?  
 (*Charles Avison : stanza vii.*)

This is not precisely the philosophy of the unconscious (the whole stanza really deserves study), but it is near enough to that to excite interest. Elsewhere he uses much the same language :

I who detecting what vice underlies  
 Thought's superstruction—fancy's sludge and slime.

The study of background in the third and last of the decades selected must be completed, as in the other decades also, by reflecting upon these quest-

ions: " Did the Nineteen-twenties praise and blame the poet for those qualities we should expect them to praise and blame? And did they notice in his work those elements or tendencies which might have been expected to interest them?" To these questions, when asked of the two other decades, a negative answer was given. But of the Nineteen-twenties we must speak differently. In attacking Browning's optimism and in repudiating his social and moral code they took the attitude which they would seem bound to take. But it is remarkable that they should not have felt bound, in repudiating his optimism, to make mention at least of that passage in *Fifine* which was quoted in the last chapter (see page 75), and in which Browning (or rather Don Juan) says that the more disagreeable a truth is, the more likely it is to be true. That is not optimism, and it is very far removed from the Victorian attitude of mind as that is represented to us by contemporary critics. Again it was to be foreseen that those who have forsaken Shelley for Crashaw should dislike the romantic vein in Browning, and that, generally speaking, all enemies of romance should accuse Browning of flaccid spirituality. But if they had read *Sordello* they could hardly have refrained from remarking upon its central thought—as new as it was unromantic—that love, instead of being an emancipator, is the very reverse, a moderator, a controlling influence which does not help man to blind himself to the awkward realities of existence, but reconciles him to them. And finally, to repeat what was said only a few lines above, it is remarkable that an age so taken up with psychological analysis should not have appraised the work of Browning from that point of view. And since it is, above all, the psycho-

logical conflicts in the individual which interest the mind of to-day, it is strange that no one has taken the trouble to inquire what signs there are in Browning of such a conflict. It is precisely this inquiry which will be attempted in the second part of the present study.

PART II  
*CONFLICT*



## CHAPTER VI

### THE OUTWARD MAN

THERE is plenty of material for anyone who wishes to form a picture of Robert Browning in his later years—and, indeed, there are still amongst us those who met and talked with him. The impressions he created upon those who met him naturally varied—and, indeed, are flatly contradictory in some cases. There are few more attractive pictures than that contained in Gosse's *Personalia*: there are few more unattractive than that presented by Mary Gladstone (Mrs. Drew) in her Diary.<sup>1</sup> But on certain points there is almost universal agreement—for instance, that he was genial, talkative, warm-hearted, differing from Tennyson about as widely as one man can differ from another in outward appearance, in manner and address. Tennyson, for instance, hid his shyness under a rather gruff, alarming manner (here again Mary Gladstone's Diary is worth consulting) and the unfriendly-disposed spoke of him as "always wrapped up in a cloud of mysterious self-adoration."

Browning was never averse from discussing the works of other poets, and was generous in his praise of those whom he admired. He would quote their verses at length—his memory was prodigious—and he could criticise them: and his criticisms were often acute. It is all the more curious that on the subject of his own poetry this genial and talkative

<sup>1</sup> See page 141.

man was comparatively reticent. Here again he stands in complete contrast to Tennyson, who did not hesitate to express admiration of his own achievements with a frankness and ingenuous simplicity that remind one of Rodin. Browning was willing enough to read his poetry to his friends, but most unwilling to discuss it with them. He would neither discuss it with friends nor, as a rule, defend it against the attacks of hostile critics.

A little time may be devoted to an attempt to measuring and commenting upon this reticence. If ever a man may be forgiven for writing about his own work, it is when in the earliest stages of his first love affair the lady invites him to tell her all about himself. And this invitation Elizabeth Barrett issued to Robert Browning in the very beginnings of their correspondence. Some response he did make, but neither then nor at any other point in their correspondence did he become eloquent or even copious on the subject. And when the two were married, and in their Florentine home pursued their poet's work, neither spoke to the other of what was going forward, until each poem or set of poems was complete and ready for the press. The most striking example of this is the familiar story of the way in which Elizabeth Barrett Browning handed to her husband the manuscript of *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. Now, we know too much about this pair of poets to be able to believe that their reticence came of any distrust or lack of sympathy. On the contrary, we know that Mrs. Browning was the only critic to whose suggestions Browning listened or whose emendations he would receive, and there are many who consider that she was on the whole his best, his most discerning, critic. Another matter



may be alluded to which illustrates this trait in Browning's character. In the biography by Hall Griffin and Minchin we are told that at the very time when he was writing *The Pied Piper of Hamelin* for little Willie Macready, his father was himself engaged upon a poem on exactly the same subject. After the father had written some sixty lines, he discovered what his son was doing and abandoned the attempt. But the elder Mr. Browning made this discovery by accident—it had not been his son's intention to tell him, although the story was one which his father must have read to him many times in his boyhood, and the news that it was being turned into verse would have interested and delighted the older man. In spite of these and other facts of the same kind there are few great men known to us whom we should find it more difficult to think of as secretive.

Was this reticence due to an over-sensitiveness to criticism? Certainly Browning had a great hatred of professional journalistic critics, whom he described as a "verminous tribe." A letter which he wrote to Alfred Domett in 1842 throws some light upon his attitude towards them: "One poor bedevilling idiot, whose performance reached me last night only, told a friend of mine the night before that, 'how *in reality* he admired beyond measure this and the other book of Mr. B's, but that *in the review*, he thought it best to, &c. &c.' This Abhorson boasted that he got £400 a year by his practices!" And what he said of critics in *Pacchiarotto* is well enough known. But in none of these utterances is there any sign of an over-sensitiveness to criticism. He disliked and despised critics, and in another letter to Alfred Domett he strongly censures Tennyson

for having altered his text to suit the comments made upon it in reviews. "The alterations are insane. *Whatever* is touched is spoiled. . . . I have been with Moxon this morning, who tells me that he is miserably thin-skinned, sensitive to criticism (foolish criticism)." The evidence appears to be conclusive that he was not contemptuous because the critics were hostile, but because they were dishonest—either directly and deliberately dishonest like the "Abhorson" of his letter to Domett or indirectly dishonest because they judged him without having read him. How far he was justified in this estimate should be clear to anyone who has read the second chapter of the present book.

He never penned any Apologia or Defence or any long explanatory Preface. He who so often showed the combative side of his nature—and he could even be pugnacious—scarcely took the trouble to defend himself. It is extraordinary that when the *Pall Mall* reprinted a poem of his from *The Century Magazine* with misprints and additions he did not write directly to the editor in order to get the matter put right: he wrote to Mrs. Frank Hill, and ended the letter thus: "So does the charge of unintelligibility attach itself to your poor friend—who can kick nobody"—and how untrue that last statement is will be clear to anyone who will recall the unhappy episode of the FitzGerald sonnet. It is, then, not easy to understand why he did not deal directly and faithfully with "the verminous tribe." Much more difficult is it to understand why he was reluctant to enlighten even his own friends—those whose opinions he is known to have valued. He did, indeed, on rare occasions explain and defend himself to these. There is a letter to Ruskin (printed in

W. G. Collingwood's *Life*, 1900 edition, pp. 163-7) which comes nearer than anything else he ever wrote to a detailed defence of his work—and is unknown to most people because omitted from the better-known biographies. It is in the main an answer to a charge of obscurity, and is too long to be quoted here in full, but this much is relevant: "A poet's affair is with God,—to whom he is accountable, and of whom is his reward;"—and this also: "I shall never change my point of sight, or feel other than disconcerted and apprehensive when the public, critics and all, begin to understand and approve me." To other correspondents he sometimes gave an explanation of some particular point of difficulty in his poetry. But even when all this is taken into account, even when we have given full weight to his belief that the poet's affair is with God, we remain puzzled, since the poet whose affair was with God did, after all, publish his poems.

His attitude to the Browning Society, and in particular his toleration of the ineptitudes of J. T. Nettleship and the shortcomings of Mrs. Orr, have already been mentioned. It is one thing to allow your enemies to misinterpret you on the ground that vengeance is the Almighty's, but common charity would seem to require that you should not allow your friends to go astray. In other words, Browning might at least have spoken out directly to the Society, to Nettleship and to Mrs. Orr. He was friendly disposed to the Society. He expressed his gratitude at the effect of their work upon the sale of his books—that he was over generous in this does not matter. Now, it was entirely discreet and right that he should not allow himself to be too much mixed up with the Society's affairs; that, in Sir Edmund Gosse's words,

he should occupy a seat in the front row of the stalls but never consent to appear on the stage.<sup>1</sup> It was entirely discreet and right that he should refuse to look over the proofs of the Browning Society's papers—"I have the appearance of authorising whatever notice it may contain, considerable or otherwise, since I receive it and say nothing—which is as good as consenting, to the ordinary apprehension"). But it was extraordinary that, for instance, although he was well acquainted with Nettleship and corresponded with him, he never protested against the paper on *Childe Roland*. Even gratitude to Nettleship cannot explain this. He never got farther than telling him in a letter that his poems were "each and all . . . purely *dramatic*, with no sort of attempt at esoteric meaning." It is still more extraordinary and even exasperating that while to a private correspondent, only a remote acquaintance, he consented to give a true and clear explanation of *Another Way of Love*, he allowed Mrs. Orr to print an explanation which robs that poem of its most characteristic dramatic climax.<sup>2</sup> And yet he admired Mrs. Orr's *Handbook* and sang its praises to Mary Gladstone.

Nor is it open to us to suppose that he hesitated to explain this or that particular passage for fear lest he should be drawn into the impossible attempt to put into other words that which in the poems themselves already stood expressed in the clearest language of which he had been capable. For in his long letter to Ruskin, after having asserted that in his poetry he had been as clear as his powers per-

<sup>1</sup> Sir Edmund Gosse informed the present writer that Browning asked him not to join the Browning Society, and did not desire that any of his friends should join it.

<sup>2</sup> See page 80.

mitted, he does proceed to deal with small individual points—e.g. to explain the line—

Stand still, true poet that you are,

and to justify scanning “foldskirts” as a trochee.

There is an air of petulance about his letter to Ruskin, and Browning himself was not unaware of it. He was annoyed because Ruskin was in a certain sense coming between him and his God. That same petulance repeats itself in most, though not all, of the few letters which he wrote in explanation of difficult passages. And sometimes he gave the impression that he himself did not know the meaning of what he had written. Besides the familiar story of “Now God only knows what it means,” there is this in Mr. E. F. Benson’s *As We Were*—“His admirers there (Cambridge) had started a Browning Society . . . which met to discuss and elucidate the poet’s more difficult moods, and he attended one of these meetings, but was said to be unable to throw any light on certain of the conundrums of his own making, which were referred to him.” It is, indeed, possible that on this, as other occasions, he did actually or metaphorically shrug his shoulders and say once again that he could not find better words to express his meaning, but it is also possible that his general attitude in the matter—his reticence, his petulance, his embarrassment—is best explained by assuming that to some extent consciously, to a larger extent unconsciously, he dissociated his poetry from the rest of his life.

Let us consider what evidence can be given in support of this theory of dissociation. Some evidence can be got from the *Pacchiarotto* volume. In

the poem which gives its name to the volume he protests against a habit of critics of importing their own meanings into his poetry, but in the second poem he protests against another habit of theirs—the habit of reading him into his own poems, of going to his poems because they are the key with which to unlock his heart. To them he says :

Which of you did I enable  
 Once to slip inside my breast,  
 There to catalogue and label  
 What I like least, what love best.  
 Hope and fear, believe and doubt of,  
 Seek and shun, respect—deride ?  
 Who has right to make a rout of  
 Rarities he found inside ?

And the same theme is repeated in *House*. Here we have very plainly expressed the picture of the poet's verse as a closed domain. Into that domain he admits no one, to find out what he himself thinks and feels :

Outside should suffice for evidence.

This, indeed, is no more than the uttering in verse of what he many times said in letters and conversations, that his work was essentially dramatic—the utterance of imaginary persons, and not the expression of his own views and feelings. But when we come to the next poem in the series, we have a rather different idea put forward. That poem is *Shop*. It is supposed to be addressed to a dead tradesman :

So, friend, your shop was all your house.

That is in accents of surprise. For the speaker had thought from the riches and curiosities he saw in

the shop window that the owner must have some wonderful private house of his own. It might be—

Some suburb-palace, parked about.  
And gated grandly, built last year :  
The four mile walk keeps off the gout ;  
Or big seat sold by bankrupt peer :  
But then he takes the rail, that's clear.

But that conjecture was all wrong. The shop was all—there was no house at all.

Nowise ! At back of all that spread  
Of merchandize, woe's me, I find  
A hole i' the wall where, heels by head,  
The owner couched, his ware behind  
—In cupboard suited to his mind.

And the speaker moralises. This sort of life is all wrong. The merchant should have something else in his life besides trafficking—

I want to know a butcher paints,  
A baker rhymes for his pursuit,  
Candlestick-maker much acquaints  
His soul with song, or, haply mute,  
Blows his brains out upon the flute !

But—shop each day and all day long !  
Friend, your good angel slept, your star  
Suffered eclipse, fate did you wrong !  
From where these sorts of treasures are,  
There should our hearts be—Christ, how far !

Is the lesson preached only to the butcher, the baker, and the candlestick-maker ? Or is the poet included also ? At first the temptation is to suppose that the poem is a sort of sermon against a purely money-grubbing materialism. Pretty certainly, however, it is more than that. Browning gives a hint in the Epilogue to *Men and Women* (*One Word More*). In that poem he shows how the poet grows tired of the business of always being poet, just as Raphael,

tired of being a painter, would write a century of sonnets and Dante prepares to paint an angel, because no artist, whatever his art, can be contented for all his life with just that.

Ay, of all the artists living, loving,  
None but would forego his proper dowry,—  
Does he paint ? he fain would write a poem,—  
Does he write ? he fain would paint a picture,  
Put to proof art alien to the artist's,  
Once and only once, and for one only,  
So to be a man and leave the artist,  
Gain the man's joy, miss the artist's sorrow.

The hint is unmistakable—the problem does exist for Browning whether a man may not be greater than an artist—life greater than poetry and overlapping it on every side. The hint is repeated elsewhere. The lover in *The Last Ride Together* cries to the poet :

You hold things beautiful the best  
And pace them in rhyme so, side by side.  
'Tis something, nay 'tis much : but then  
Have you yourself what's best for men ?

And Norbert, the hero of *In a Balcony*, says :

We live and they experiment on life  
These poets, painters, all who stand aloof  
To overlook the farther.

Then there is a passage in *The Two Poets of Croisic* in which the narrator comments upon his story in a concluding passage remarkable for its beauty and power (stanzas clii to the end) from which this much may be quoted :

There's a simple test  
Would serve, when people take on them to weigh  
The works of poets, " Who was better, best,  
This, that, the other bard ? . . . . .  
. . . . . End the strife  
By asking, " Which one led a happy life ? "



All this evidence does not by itself prove that Browning tended to dissociate his poetry from the rest of his life, since all that it seems to amount to is the perfectly reasonable idea that no one, not even a great artist, can afford to be nothing but an artist. But when it is taken in conjunction with Browning's reticence about his poetry and with the inconsistencies in his attitude towards all his critics, it does in some degree at least corroborate the suggestion that he tended much more than most poets—and more indeed than was wholly reasonable—to shut off his poetry from the rest of his life. For it is one thing for the poet to try his hand at painting or sculpture: it is quite a different thing for a man to be a poet to-day and a sculptor to-morrow, and never or very rarely to allow the poet and the sculptor to meet.

Of this dissociation there is other evidence. We may find it if we consider the outward man, that is to say, if we recall his appearance, his manner, his method of conducting his affairs. And perhaps we might hardly do better than to begin by recalling Max Beerbohm's caricature of the poet taking tea with the Browning Society of London. The neat little smiling man in Max Beerbohm's cartoon looks like a well-to-do doctor or solicitor surrounded by a most depressing company of ill-dressed, heavily serious intellectuals. Browning was always careful in his dress, a habit most contrary to all that is expected of poets. Mrs. Bridell Fox described him in his early days as "just a trifle of a dandy, addicted to lemon-coloured gloves and such things: quite 'the glass of fashion and the mould of form.'"  
Less attractive but not more poetical is the description of him by Miss Arnould, who was far from

sharing her brothers' admiration. She saw in him a pasty-faced youth of Jewish appearance with long heavily pomaded locks : a youth over-confident in manner and loud in speech. To return to his later years, there is much evidence for the accuracy of Max Beerbohm's version. Messrs. Hall Griffin and Minchin write : " His appearance was robust, manly and impressive ; his abundant white hair, expressive glance and alert demeanour made him a noticeable figure in any assemblage ; but there was nothing in his look which distinctly proclaimed the poet." All his portraits confirm this account of him, and everyone will recall the famous saying, " I like Browning : he isn't like a damned literary man." They may be invited now to forget that other remark about " a too exuberant financier." But the most attractive picture of him in his later days has been painted by Mr. E. F. Benson in *As We Were*. He there relates how on one occasion Browning was entertained at Newnham by some enthusiastic students. After tea his hostess, " in a frenzy of diffidence and devotion, told him that she had woven a crown of roses for him, from which all thorns and unpleasant moistures had been banished, and might she have the extreme honour of placing it on his head." The poet consented. " So there he sat, bland and ruddy, and slightly buttery from the muffins, with the crown of pink roses laid upon his white locks and looking like a lamb decked for sacrifice." Then he fulfilled his promise to read one of his poems. His choice fell upon *A Serenade at the Villa*, but after he had recited a line or two, suddenly he caught sight in the mirror of " the image of himself crowned with pink roses. He broke into a peal of the most jovial laughter. ' My

dear young ladies,' he said, ' shall I not read *The Patriot* instead ? It was roses, roses, all the way.' "

One tries in vain to see Tennyson in the same situation. The ending would have been different.

Yet not any more in his old age than in his youth did he make upon all who met him an equally happy impression by his personal appearance and outward habits. Mary Gladstone, who met him in 1870, said : " Mr. B. is not altogether a remarkable person to look at, and talks in a rather too self-confident way." It was worse still next time she met the poet in March 1874. " After to Mr. Baring's for music. . . . Felt dreadfully tired and done and Browning brushed my face with his beard." Three years later than that she had not yet conquered her repugnance. " He talks everybody down with his dreadful voice, and always places his person in such disagreeable proximity with yours and puffs and blows and spits in your face. I tried to think of Abt Vogler, but it was no use—he couldn't ever have written it." And yet when she heard of his death she spoke of her feeling of " ungetoverable personal loss "—but it may be that she was thinking of Abt Vogler.

As much as in his outward appearance, Browning was unpoetical in his way of ordering his life. Jowett's comment is well known : " I had no idea there was a perfectly sensible poet in the world," and his friend and benefactor Kenyon said that he was struck by his common sense and its " contrast to his muddy metaphysical poetry." There was in him a touch of the " bon bourgeois " who loomed so large in Victor Hugo. He exercised care in the management of his financial affairs, and hated to

leave debts unpaid. He does not seem to have been in any practical matter absent-minded or careless. Many of his letters to his son and to Miss Isa Blagden are the letters one would expect from an entirely practical and unromantic British business man. In his early middle life it would seem from his wife's letters that he suffered from nervous irritability, and that in these moods his sense of proportion broke down, but there is no evidence that this continued into his later life.

Then, again, in early youth he seems to have had a quite normal healthy liking for social occasions. "I heard of you, dear Miss Barrett, between a Polka and a Cellarius the other evening." It would seem, however, as if Mrs. Browning's influence tended to extinguish this taste for a time—or, if not to extinguish his taste, to alter his attitude in these matters. During their married life he did not shun social occasions, but he did not welcome them in the same spirit as in his later years.

By way of digression it is interesting to notice that this loud-voiced, over-confident man of Mary Gladstone's painting detested public speaking. This hatred endured through his life and is said to account for his refusal to be named Lord Rector of the University of Glasgow or Lord Rector of the University of St. Andrews (in 1875 and 1877 respectively). Thirty years before this he had written to Elizabeth Barrett telling her of his anguish of mind at having to respond to the toast of Poetry at a public dinner.

It was an irony of fate that in 1846 Robert Browning should have written, "I am convinced that general society depresses my spirits more than any other cause," and that in the Seventies or Eighties people

should have been saying of him that "he had dined himself away." For in the later part of his life—at almost any time after 1873—he had become a prominent figure in London society. He was present at all social functions. It is recorded of him that he was aggrieved because he had received no summons to be present at the Jubilee service in Westminster Abbey. He accepted invitations to the country houses of the great; scandal said that "he was proposing to Lady Ashburton . . . at least she let it be thought so," and all the good it seems to have done him was to earn him the reputation of being a snob.

And this irony of fate takes on another aspect when we recall what this poet had written in *Paracelsus* and in *Sordello* about the world's praises and the world's pleasures :

The scheme was realized  
Too suddenly in one respect : a crowd  
Praising, eyes quick to see, and lips as loud  
To speak, delicious homage to receive . . .  
... Courted thus at unawares,  
In spite of his pretensions and his cares,  
He caught himself shamefully hankering  
After the obvious petty joys that spring  
From true life, fain relinquish pedestal  
And condescend with pleasures. . . .

In this our own day, though the accusations of snobbery and of worldliness still make themselves heard, the generality of readers of Browning are little perturbed and less pained by them. They do not see in his sudden immersion into mundanities the true cause of the waning of his poetic lights, so much as an accompanying circumstance. But it may be that not even this is a correct or full interpretation of this side of the man. This side of him was at war

with another side—there is that much justification for the apprehension felt by some of his friends and for the malice of his ill-wishers. The single instance of Browning's complete good sense and unpoetic exterior is a truly remarkable exception to the rule which hundreds of illustrious instances have established—that poets are far from home in Belgravia; that they are *genus irritabile*, and that they have no love of neatness in dress. More than this, there is a definite danger of critics distorting the facts of the case and misinterpreting the poet's poetry in order to see reflected in it the worldly and even rather bourgeois element in his character. It would be much nearer the truth to suggest that the non-poetical elements in his character reflected or were tempered by some of the influences which form his poetry—by his generosity, for instance, and his noble modesty. Thus the view of Jowett from which one sentence has been quoted continues to this effect—“entirely free from enmity, jealousy, or any other littleness, and thinking no more of himself than if he were an ordinary man.” And Jowett was certainly not a sentimentalist.

While it is important not to exaggerate the inconsistencies in his character to the point of suggesting that he was positively unbalanced—a case for a pathologist—yet there are grounds for thinking them more important than has generally been recognised. By calling them important, no more is meant in this context than that the explanation of them might give us a new idea of his poetry—present it in a new perspective. Let us first very briefly consider what they amount to as far as we have gone. There are first the inconsistencies in the outward man—the philosophic poet who dressed like a prosperous

solicitor and frequented the tables of the great. Then there are the inconsistencies in his attitude (so far as that found expression in conduct) towards poetry in general and his own poetry in particular. A talkative, frank, courageous man, he was not averse from discussing other men's poetry, but he shrank from talking about his own.<sup>1</sup> And what is the explanation of all this? It was suggested that Browning consciously or unconsciously dissociated poetry from the rest of his life—that he kept apart Robert Browning the poet and Robert Browning the citizen. But the word "dissociation" is very little more than a summing up of the inconsistencies. It goes very little way towards affording an explanation: it goes only thus far, that it has certain psychological associations, amongst which is the association with conflict. Without any hazardous attempt at a psychological analysis, we may perhaps consider in the remainder of this study what evidences his poetry and what is known of his life afford of any kind of conflict in him. We pass from inconsistencies in the outward man to inconsistencies in his poetry. Something may be said here by way of anticipating what is to follow. It will be considered whether his moments of poetic creation—or rather, if the term may be admitted, of poetic incubation<sup>2</sup>—were not accompanied by a certain distress of mind,

<sup>1</sup> Oscar Browning, however, in *Memories of Sixty Years* writes: "Browning's conversation was a great contrast to George Eliot's. She was always serious, always gave you of her best. Browning rarely discussed serious topics, philosophical, literary or artistic; his talk was that of a man of the world."

<sup>2</sup> Incubation may be a more appropriate metaphor, because his distress of mind seems to have set in before the actual moment of making poetry had arrived. But it is not a really satisfactory term, because the distress continued after the poem had been completed. Whilst the distress afflicted him, activities were unchained which, when they could not find an outlet in verse-making, had to be discharged in sculpture, or modelling in clay, or some such pursuit.

rather more intense than most poets have experienced. Once he had, as it were, expelled the poem, the after-results of this distress might well take the form of some unwillingness (conscious or unconscious) to remember<sup>1</sup> it or converse about it. There does not seem to have been, at any rate in the years when he was producing his greatest work, much of the atmosphere of " felicitous fulfilment of function " in his labour of creation, even though he often worked so rapidly, nor much of the craftsman's delight and self-absorption in his task. It seems to have been an effort to him to bring himself to his writing-desk, and the *Love Letters* tell us a plain story of strain and turmoil and physical reactions. In his later years—the years that followed the publication of *The Ring and The Book*—things went more smoothly, inasmuch as working hours became almost a routine of his life. In those years he grasped the torch more confidently and carried it more easily, but as a torch it had become somewhat less formidable.

<sup>1</sup> Naturally, he neither did nor could always forget. He had, for example, to revise his poems for new editions. Sometimes, however, he forgot. On one occasion a lady reported to Furnivall that Browning had failed to recognise a quotation from one of his own poems. Furnivall was filled with glee, and promptly set to work to take advantage of the situation. He arranged by correspondence that each of all the Browning Societies in this country and the United States should present the poet, on the occasion of his next birthday, which was shortly due, with a complete edition of his published poems. We are not told how the poet received this Boëotian jest.



## CHAPTER VII

### TIME AND ETERNITY

NEARLY all critics of Browning agree on two points: that his poetry is remarkable for its unity and self-consistency, and that he is the poet of action, and not of contemplation. There are grounds, however, upon which both criticisms can be attacked. In the first place, it is known that he entertained a profound admiration for poets of the contemplative life. A generation which finds Donne so much to its taste does not appear to realise that a century ago Browning himself was reading and loving Donne, of whom hardly anyone had heard. Nor did he lose his admiration and love. Sir Sidney Colvin, in his *Memoirs and Notes*, has written: "I recollect his (Browning's) coming out once with a long crabbedly fine screed from John Donne and declaring that he had not read or called it to mind for thirty years." Then follows a passage from the *Elegy on Mistress Boulstred*, beginning with the lines—

Spiritual treason, atheism 'tis to say  
That any can thy summons disobey . . .

And again Browning himself wrote to Elizabeth Barrett that "Music should enwrap the thought as Donne says 'an amber drop enwraps a bee.'" He set to music Donne's song "Go and catch a falling star . . .," and quotes him in *The Two Poets of Croisic*, and adds, "Better and truer verse none ever wrote, than thou, revered and magisterial Donne."

In the second place, it is possible to exaggerate his interest in action. Consider, for example, the critic who writes that there is no such word as repose in Browning's vocabulary, and points out that even a description of sunrise in *Pippa* has an element of violence in it :

O'er night's brim day boils at last :  
Boils, pure gold, o'er the cloud-cup's brim  
Where spurting and suppressed it lay. . . .

He forgets that eight lines farther down comes the line—

Thy long blue solemn hours serenely flowing,  
and also has forgotten, in another poem—

Where the quiet-coloured end of evening smiles.

If such considerations as this should lead us to question the validity of the estimate that Browning is essentially the poet of action, and that his published work is distinguished from that of some of his contemporaries by its *unus color*, is there any crucial test which can be applied in order to decide the point? Let us take the idea of the *unus color* of his poetry. Imagine a man of keen critical discernment and mature scholarship, familiar with the whole of Browning's poetry, but wholly ignorant of the chronological order of the several poems. It would be an interesting experiment to ask him whether he could, solely upon internal evidence, arrange in their right order of date the following poems : *Humility* ; *A Pearl, a Girl* ; the lyric from *Ferishtah* beginning, " Not with my soul, Love . . ." ; *Mesmerism*, *Epilogue to Dramatis Personæ*, *The Twins*, *Tray* and *Misconceptions*. Or yet again, having informed

this critic that in the 1889 edition many of the poems are out of their chronological order, we might ask him, again on the basis of internal evidence, to rearrange them in the order in which they were written. It is more than likely that the broad differences of subject and treatment between *Red Cotton Nightcap Country* and *Paracelsus* would seem suggestive. He might conclude that a certain dryness and volubility, an almost fussy buzzing round an argument or point of view in *Parleyings*, afforded evidence of a loss of power incident to old age. He might remark something like bitterness in *Dramatis Personæ* and suspect that this bitterness was not characteristic of youth—at least in a poet whose most frequent moods are so far removed from bitterness. These and similar broad differences would be discernible, but when he had exploited them to the utmost, we should expect him to conclude that they were not sufficient to dispel a belief in the essential oneness of the whole body of poems. We could not suppose that from internal evidence he would conjecture that *Johannes Agricola*<sup>1</sup> and *Karshish*, which are placed next to each other in the 1889 edition, are separated in time by nearly twenty years. Is there anything, again, in *Saul*, in its final shape, to suggest that the first part of it was published as a separate poem in *Dramatic Romances* ten years before the complete poem was published in *Men and Women*?

The test, if that forecast is correct, would establish the unity of Browning's poetry. But the forecast is perhaps not correct. We may hardly have done justice to our imagined critic in assuming that in the whole body of this poetry he would find nothing but at most a uniform development. On further con-

<sup>1</sup> First published in *The Monthly Repository*, 1836 (Vol. X, No. 5).

sideration we might expect him to separate out a number of poems containing elements which, more exactly assessed, make them seem to be out of harmony with the rest. And it is not improbable that he might pronounce that these incongruous elements were important out of all proportion to the number of poems or passages in which they are exhibited.

In order to understand what these elements are and to measure their importance, let us take two very familiar poems—*Evelyn Hope* and *The Last Ride Together*. In both the theme is apparent failure in love. In *Evelyn Hope* a man is meditating upon his love for a girl, much younger than himself, who has died before he had declared himself.

Sixteen years old when she died !  
 Perhaps she had scarcely heard my name ;  
 It was not her time to love. . . .

The other lover, in *The Last Ride Together*, has declared his love and has been rejected. But the resemblances do not end in the fact that both men have been apparently unsuccessful. Evelyn Hope's lover does not think he has come too late—

No indeed ! for God above  
 Is great to grant as mighty to make,  
 And creates the love to reward the love ;  
 I claim you still for my own love's sake.

On this side of the grave he cannot claim her, but the time will come—

Delayed it may be for more lives yet,  
 Through worlds I shall traverse, not a few ;  
 Much is to learn, much to forget  
 Ere the time be come for taking you.

Here is the conception characteristic, it is said, of Browning, and so familiar that one might almost apologise for mentioning it, of the reward delayed, of the prize more valued and more valuable because it is out of the hand's grasp. Here is a hint of the idea that if a man obtains his heart's desire in this life there is nothing left for him to strive for, because there is nothing to look forward to. Here is, finally, the idea, equally familiar perhaps, but not so frequently the subject of comment, of a soul passing through a series of existences beyond the grave. This idea first finds its expression in *Sordello* (Book VI) in a passage to which we shall return in a moment. The most familiar passage embodying it is to be found in *Old Pictures in Florence* :

There's a fancy some lean to and others hate—  
That when this life is ended, begins  
New work for the soul in another state,  
Where it strives and gets weary, loses and wins.  
Where the strong and the weak, this world's congeries,  
Repeat in large what they practised in small,  
Through life after life in unlimited series ;  
Only the scale's to be changed, that's all.

Or perhaps in *Cristina*—

Doubt you if, in some such moment,  
As she fixed me, she felt clearly,  
Ages past the soul existed,  
Here an age 'tis resting merely,  
And hence fleets again for ages. . . .

Or again in *One Word More*—

I stand on my attainment,  
This of verse alone, one life allows me ;  
Verse and nothing else have I to give you.  
Other heights in other lives, God willing.

And in *The Last Ride Together* we have very much the same attitude expressed in these lines :

Who knows what's fit for us ? Had fate  
Proposed bliss here should sublimate  
My being—had I signed the bond—  
Still one must lead some life beyond,  
Have a bliss to die with, dim-described.

So far the resemblance between these two love poems is fairly complete, but what has not been observed by any commentator is that at the very end of *The Last Ride Together* there is a complete and most dramatic reversal of the whole of this point of view. In order to bring this out as clearly as possible, it will be necessary to devote some attention to the development of the thought throughout the poem.

The poem begins in a mood of the strongest resistance to any idea of failure—

My whole heart rises up to bless  
Your name in pride and thankfulness.

The lover asks, as a last boon, that once more they may ride together, and after a moment's hesitation that is granted, and the ride begins :

My soul  
Smoothed itself out like a long-cramped scroll  
Freshening and fluttering in the wind. . . .

And the lover reflects, "What need to strive with a life awry ?" which shows that for a moment he yields to the sense of failure. He goes on to reckon the extent of his failure and to compare himself with other men, since "all men strive, and who succeeds ?" And as he passes in review the rewards of the statesman, the soldier, the poet, the sculptor and the musician, he finds that not one of them has

gained a boon as precious as this of his last ride with the beloved. Thus he asks the poet—

Are you—poor, sick, old ere your time—  
Nearer one whit your own sublime  
Than we who never have turned a rhyme ?  
Sing, riding's a joy ! For me, I ride.

A new courage and a new hope are growing in him, and he reflects (this comes in the last stanza but one) that he is only so much the better off, if his reward—if perfect happiness, that is to say—is yet unattained. He has yet his bliss to look forward to and to inspire and guide him. If he had already gained it, what could there have been to look forward to ? So far we are on perfectly familiar ground—so familiar that the reader may well ask why he has been wearied with this repetition. The answer is in order the more clearly to point the contrast with the next verse, which is quite foreign in conception to anything which is usually associated with Browning :

And yet—she has not spoke so long !  
What if heaven be that, fair and strong  
At life's best, with our eyes upturned  
Whither life's flower is first discerned,  
We fixed so, ever should so abide ?  
What if we still ride on, we two,  
With life for ever old, yet new,  
Changed not in kind but in degree,  
The instant made eternity,—  
And heaven just prove that I and she  
Ride, ride together, for ever ride ?

The idea of an endless series of existences leading from one degree of achievement to another implies a particular conception of the objective reality of time succession. Now, anyone who so thinks of time as something possessing an objective reality cannot

attach any meaning to the phrase, "The instant made eternity." On the other hand, "The instant made eternity" enables a man within the cramped limits of however short and imperfect an existence to realise his gain, to enjoy his reward. There is a contradiction here. To put it vulgarly, you cannot have it both ways.

Before any further comment is made on this conception of the eternal moment, it will be in place to inquire whether there are many passages in Browning in which it recurs, for if *The Last Ride Together* were the only poem in which it is to be found, the matter would deserve little if any attention. It will be noticed that the idea is introduced in the last stanza of this poem in direct antithesis to the "endless series" idea contained in the last stanza but one. Exactly the same thing happens in *Old Pictures in Florence*. The stanza of that poem in which the idea of an endless series is expressed has already been quoted. It is immediately followed by this :

Yet I hardly know. When a soul has seen  
By means of Evil that Good is best,  
The uses of labour are surely done ;  
There remaineth a rest for the people of God :  
And I have had troubles enough for one.

It may not be Browning who is speaking—we cannot safely assume that it is. But the passage is not easy to reconcile with the criticism that there is no such word as repose in Browning's vocabulary. Even more difficult is it to believe that *By the Fireside* is purely dramatic—that it does not reflect Browning's own feelings. Yet for the purpose of our present argument it makes no difference whether it is dram-



atic or not. Of all that is beautiful in that poem no lines are more beautiful than these :

Oh moment, one and infinite !  
The water slips o'er stock and stone ;  
The West is tender, hardly bright :  
How gray at once is the evening grown—  
One star, its chrysolite !

But their significance has escaped notice. No doubt the main thought in the poem is that of the critical moment which comes into every man's life, when he must stake all that he has gained upon a single issue. This is an idea generally recognised as being characteristic of the poet. What has not been recognised as characteristic is the further idea that this critical moment may in a certain sense be out of time altogether, something which transcends time and remains at unity with itself—"the instant made eternity."

Next may be taken a group of passages which, considered together, seem to suggest a conception of eternity as something enveloping, as it were, time and space. (The conception is most difficult to express, since the attempt to express is itself dependent upon metaphors of time and space.) First, in *Abt Vogler* the beautiful but fugitive invention of the composer is, as it were, taken up into the repository of the eternal ; or, to use another metaphor, has set upon it the seal of the eternal—

All we have willed or hoped or dreamed of good shall exist ;  
Not its semblance, but itself ; no beauty, nor good, nor power  
Whose voice has gone forth, but each survives for the melodist  
When eternity affirms the conception of an hour.

(To anticipate, it is important to notice the difference between such a notion and the Platonic doctrine

of Ideas.) Now, as eternity itself may set its seal upon the moment within our stretch of time, so also we from within that temporal realm may look into eternity (may, indeed, do so at our peril : that is a point which will be dealt with presently). In *Dis Aliter Visum*, the woman who is speaking blames the man who had been her lover for not carrying his purpose through and helping her in some—

. . . feat, which, done, would make time break,  
And let us pent-up creatures through  
Into eternity our due. . . .

And in *A Death in the Desert*, Saint John, knowing the weakness of understanding of his disciples, says to them :

. . . Ye would withdraw your sense  
From out eternity, strain it upon time. . . .

In yet another passage, much more familiar in its thought, death is made the gateway which leads from the temporal into the eternal :

. . . What's death, then ? Even now  
With so much knowledge is it hard to bear  
Brief interfusing ignorance ? Is care  
For a creation found at fault just there—  
There where the heart breaks bond and outruns time,  
To reach, not follow, what shall be ?

(*Gerard de Lairese.*)

The orthodox Christian sentiment in a line of *The Boy and the Angel*—

With God a day endures away—

may be compared with a far less conventional utterance in Rabbi Ben Ezra's words—

Time's wheel runs back or stops : Potter and clay endure—

which has obvious affinities with *Abt Vogler*. A further development of the general conception of the interaction of the realms of the temporal and eternal is suggested in a line from *Charles Avison*—

Truths escape  
Time's insufficient garniture—

as though—again employing a metaphor inadequate, if not actually misleading—portions of the eternal were embedded in the temporal. But the fullest treatment of this last aspect of the problem is to be found in Book VI of *Sordello*, in what is unfortunately, but perhaps unavoidably, one of the obscurest parts of that “wholly unintelligible” poem. The whole of this passage is so important for our immediate purpose as to deserve a somewhat detailed examination.

In the closing scene, so to speak, of the drama, *Sordello* is faced with the problem of accepting or rejecting the “badge,” the sign of imperial authority, which his father, Taurello Salinguerra, has offered him. His troubled mind reviews his past life and his possible future. He has to decide between Palma and supreme worldly authority on the one hand, and the People and his conscience on the other. The mental effort throws an intolerable strain upon his feeble strength, and he breaks down. But in his last moments he sees clearly the secret of his failure and the possibility of his redemption—as it is not infrequent in Browning to find truth in the minds and on the lips of dying men. He becomes aware of the impact of eternity upon time. The eternal expresses or manifests itself in this sphere of time known to us, just as it may manifest itself in other

spheres, taking on one shape here but quite another there—

Once this understood,  
As suddenly he felt himself alone,  
Quite out of Time and this world . . .

He sees, moreover, that what we have just spoken of as the impact of eternity on time may be fatal unless it is controlled. Somehow the infinite must be made to fit the finite. It is in man's power—man who in a sense employs the infinite—to exercise this control. And here we may quote the actual words of the text :

Let the employer watch the thing employed,  
Fit to the finite his infinity,  
And thus proceed for ever, in degree  
Changed but in kind the same.

“ Proceed,” that is, from sphere to sphere—from existence to existence. And in each sphere the infinite must be accommodated to the special circumstances (whatever they may be) of that sphere :

A sphere is but a sphere ;  
Small, Great, are merely terms we bandy here ;  
Since to the spirit's absoluteness all  
Are like.

Here we have, apparently, placed side by side the notion of a series of existences—possibly endless, and an Absolute or Eternal Power or Soul. And so far as any attempt is made to reconcile them, it must be through the assumption that for its expression or manifestation the eternal requires the temporal.

There remain to be mentioned a group of love poems in which the notion of the supreme ecstasy of love as something transcending time is to be

remarked. Taken by itself, this group might have no great significance—the idea is familiar enough, and it might even be maintained that Browning here is simply dramatic, that is to say, that he makes his lovers speak so, just because it has always been their way. But the treatment of the problem of time and eternity in the other passages with which we have been dealing may justify a reader in attaching also a special significance to a passage like this from *Eurydice* :

Hold me but safe again within the bond  
Of one immortal look ! All woe that was,  
Forgotten, and all terror that may be,  
Defied—no past is mine, no future : look at me !

Which is very closely akin to this :

No past, no future—so thine arms but screen  
The present from surprise. . . .  
(*Ferishtah* : epilogue to *Plot Culture*.)

And to this :

. . . Ah Sweet—  
The moment eternal—just that and no more . . .  
(*Now*.)

The next quotation which it will be useful to give here is from *Luria* :

My own East !  
How nearer God we were ! He glows above  
With scarce an intervention, presses close  
And palpitatingly, His soul o'er ours :  
We feel Him, nor by painful reason know !  
The everlasting minute of creation  
Is felt there.

(*Luria*. Act V.)

To these words Browning himself referred later on :  
“ Time and space being purely conceptions of our own, wholly inapplicable to intelligence of another kind—with whom, as I made *Luria* say, there is an

everlasting moment of creation, if one at all—past, present and future one and the same state.”

In the view thus stated by Browning there is nothing original—indeed, it is familiar. Most churchgoers have heard it more than once from a pulpit. Yet it is important here because it is a direct statement by Browning of a belief if not in an unchanging God (the rest of the context in *Luria* is worth studying) at least a God who stands outside time and space. From this to an idealist philosophy of the Absolute seems a step which cannot be avoided, but there is clear evidence that Browning was aware of the difficulties of such a position. The clearest evidence is in one of the latest poems that he published, *Rephan*, in the *Asolando* volume. It is here that the conflict between the contemplative and the active dispositions is most vividly drawn. The picture of a static and unchanging absolute is in these lines :

None felt distaste when better or worse  
Were uncontrastable : bless or curse  
What—in that uniform universe ?

Can your world's phrase, your sense of things  
Forth-figure the Star of my God ! No springs  
No winters throughout its space. Time brings

No hope, no fear ; as today shall be  
Tomorrow : advance or retreat need we  
At our standstill through eternity ?

Such was the realm of the Star *Rephan*. But in the midst of its perfection somehow “ there lurked a seed of change that worked obscure in my heart till perfection irked.” And a longing sprang up for a life of change, of difference, of perfection varied by imperfection—love by hate.

Oh, gain were indeed to see above  
Supremacy ever—to move, remove,

Not reach—aspire, yet never attain  
To the object aimed at !

Here, at the end of his life, the poet brings into direct conflict the two points of view—the view of reality as something timeless, and the view of it as an endless series in time. We have no right to identify his views with the views of the speaker in the poem, which he has expressly referred to in an introductory note as having been suggested by Jane Taylor's prose story *How it Strikes a Stranger*. We cannot say that to Browning the idea of an endless series of existences in which man endlessly strives towards perfection seems preferable to the idea that the reality is something independent of time and space. Indeed, we cannot even say that the speaker in that poem himself preferred such a view, since he refers to a Divine Being who holds himself separated from both the timeless, changeless realm of the Star Rephan and the imperfect and changing life of man upon earth.

The difficulties inherent in the conception of a timeless and spaceless Absolute are as old as the idealist philosophy itself, and have never yet been solved in a way which carried general conviction. If Browning arrived at some solution satisfactory to himself, it is not anywhere expressed in his poems. He was aware of the conflicting ideas, and though to one he assigned more room and weight, at least the other is present and conspicuous enough to attract more attention than it appears to have received.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> It is only fair to say that it receives mention in Professor C. H. Herford's *Browning*, but it is only a passing mention.

## CHAPTER VIII

### MYSTICISM

BROWNING, we saw in the last chapter, is not merely inconsistent in the manner in which he talks about time and eternity, he actually contradicts himself. The contradiction is important, because it endangers what is generally looked upon as one of the essentials of his view of life—the notion that in this life we must not look to have our reward, and even more than that, that to obtain our reward in this life would be almost a disaster. One of the most characteristic instances of his self-contradiction we found in *The Last Ride Together*. There the lover who began by thinking that he must “have a bliss to die with, dim-described,” ends by believing that as a matter of fact he has already attained his bliss in an instant whose experiences transcend the boundaries of time.

The relations between the realm of time and space and the realm of the infinite and eternal, as those relations are defined or sketched in in Browning's poetry, must occupy us a little further. At the outset it may be suggested that much of Browning's thought and language on the subject suggests in some degree the thought and language of the mystics. Perhaps, then, the most convenient way in which to attack a very elusive and difficult problem will be to ask how much of the mystic there was in Browning. His commentators, with few exceptions, have described his philosophy as a kind of idealism (which



obviously owes much, directly or indirectly, to Plato), and we might begin by looking at the resemblances and differences between the idealist and the mystic.

The most salient difference is that idealism is philosophical while mysticism is religious as well as philosophical. According to Miss Evelyn Underhill, an essential characteristic of the mystic is "an overwhelming consciousness of God and of his own soul"; and his main desire is to bring his soul into contact with his God. God he conceives as an all-pervasive power at unity with itself and the particular contact with that power at which the mystic is aiming is a complete absorption of himself into God. Lastly, whereas the idealist philosopher must depend upon reasoned argument for attaining the truth about himself and God, according to the mystic reason or dialectic will not suffice to carry man within sight and hearing of his God. Direct communion with God is in moments of ecstasy in which the mystic is lifted above the temporary, the incidental, the phenomenal. In spirit he transcends the flesh. And rare and hard as those moments of vision are, so is any language difficult to find which could convey to another their nature. More than in any other intercourse the language must mean beyond itself. It must be in a special sense symbolical.

We may take these characteristics of mysticism one by one and inquire how far each is exhibited in Browning's poetry.

The "consciousness of God and of his own soul" is so constant and so assured in all that poetry, that little comment or illustration is required. Take one of the very few poems in which he expressly speaks in his own person, namely, *La Saisiaz*. There, in a moment of acute distress of mind, he examines

himself and his experience with all the earnestness and sincerity and persistence of which he is capable, and the conclusion of the whole long poem is that he "at least believed in Soul, was very sure of God." Whether it is possible to call his consciousness of God and of his own soul overwhelming is not quite so certain, if that implies that God and his soul stand out in the foreground of all his thoughts and all his writings. It would not be true to say that he was unintermittently preoccupied with these thoughts, in the way in which, in their writings, the mystics were preoccupied. But that his consciousness amounted to a passionate conviction which informed and lay at the base of all his thoughts is beyond dispute.

How, in Browning's poetry, is man represented as being brought into contact with God? So far as any brief answer can be given, he is brought into contact in two ways: by a vision or in a moment of intensest experience (for instance, at birth or in the break-up of the flesh in death) or by something which in the preceding chapter was called by the rather vague term, "the impact of the eternal and infinite." At first sight both ways of approach look very much like mysticism, but when they are examined more closely, it will be seen that there are essential differences.

The vision of the full truth and glory of God or of the spiritual world is more than the mind of man can bear without suffering or even disaster.

It were the seeing Him, no flesh shall dare.

From this view springs an interesting consequence. Wordsworth in his *Intimations* Ode speaks of the child as coming upon earth "trailing clouds of glory," with the vision of the eternal and infinite yet

bright in him. It fades, yet not so utterly but that ever afterwards, "though inland far we be," we can still hear "the mighty waters rolling evermore." Now, there is a passage in *Bishop Blougram's Apology* which might almost seem to have been written expressly to contradict this familiar thought of Wordsworth's. The bishop, like Wordsworth, believes that in the moment of birth the child still beholds the light of the realm from which it has come—but only in a flash. And the flash leaves a wound which somehow must be healed.

. . . the child  
Feels God a moment, ichors o'er the place. . . .

For he must be protected against the light, and will need that protection so long as he remains human. And this view of the dangerousness of the vision of God is not peculiar to Bishop Blougram: it is also put into the mouth of the Pope in *The Ring and the Book* and Saint John in *A Death in the Desert*. And in both these instances we again find something directly contrary to the suggestions of Wordsworth. It is suggested in the *Intimations* Ode that man's vision of the eternal fades as he grows older—as the shades of the prison house close in upon him. But Browning's Saint John says that advancing years "wear the thickness thin and let man see." Here are lines from the prophecy the apostle utters in his last moments:

And how shall I assure them? Can they have  
—They who have flesh, a veil of youth and strength  
About each spirit, that needs must bide its time,  
Living and learning still as years assist  
Which wear the thickness thin and let man see—  
With me who hardly am withheld at all, .  
But shudderingly, scarce a shred between,  
Lie bare to the universal prick of light. . . .

And so again in *The Ring and the Book* the Pope finds himself, in the "grey ultimate decrepitude" of his old age—

Sensible of fires that more and more  
Visit a soul, in passage to the sky,  
Left nakeder than when flesh robe was new.

Again in the moment of bodily dissolution Sordello at last sees the truth :

So seemed Sordello's closing-truth evolved  
By his flesh-half's break up.

But a far more striking instance is to be found in *Jochanan Hakkadosh*. His last difficult words—

Stay !  
What is . . . I would that . . . were it . . . I had been . . .  
O sudden change, as if my arid clay  
Burst into bloom !—

were confirmed by the words uttered by his  
"Ruach," his ghost, to his followers :

All hail,  
Day of my soul's deliverance,—day the new  
The never-ending . . .  
Could I impart and could thy mind embrace  
The secret Tsaddik !

The sharp universal prick of light painful in this hour of death is disastrous to a man in his full manhood—a doctrine to be found in *Karshish* and in *Blougram*, of the better-known poems of Browning, and in *The Two Poets of Croisic*, of the more unfamiliar. Karshish, wandering through Judæa, reaches Bethany, where he falls in with Lazarus, whom Christ had raised from the dead. Lazarus in

that brief time of his first death had come face to face with the full glory of the spiritual life around the earthly life. When he was brought back to earthly life, he was a changed man, so strange in his ways that he passed for a madman. His whole scale of values appeared to have been distorted.

Heaven opened to a soul while yet on Earth,  
Earth forced on a soul's use while seeing heaven !  
The man is witless of the size, the sum,  
The value in proportion of all things,  
Or whether it be little or be much.  
Discourse to him of prodigious armaments  
Assembled to besiege his city now,  
And of the passing of a mule with gourds—  
'Tis one ! Then take it on the other side,  
Speak of some trifling fact,—he will gaze rapt  
With stupor at its very littleness,  
(Far as I see) as if in that indeed  
He caught prodigious import, whole results. . . .

It is only with great difficulty (since his scale of values has been thus distorted) that the man can continue to guide himself through his daily life. Live on this earth he must, and so he painfully follows a clue, a thread—

Which runs across a vast distracting orb  
Of glory on either side that meagre thread  
Which, conscious of, he must not enter yet—  
The spiritual life around this earthly life :  
The law of that is known to him as this,  
His heart and brain move there, his feet stay here.

*Karshish* was published in 1855. Nearly a quarter of a century later, almost precisely the same thoughts concerning man's vision of the spiritual life are expressed in *The Two Poets of Croisic*. The whole passage (stanzas lix to lxvi) is too long to be quoted in full, but the following lines give an idea of its

general import and its resemblance to the passages from *Karshish* which have just been quoted :

lix

Well, I care, intimately care to have  
Experience how a human creature felt  
In after-life who bore the burden grave  
Of certainly believing God had dealt  
For once directly with him : did not rave  
—A maniac, did not find his reason melt  
—An idiot, but went on, in peace or strife,  
The world's way, lived an ordinary life.

lxi

Does he stand stock-like henceforth ? or proceed  
Dizzily, yet with course straightforward still,  
Down-trampling vulgar hindrance ?

A little farther on he speculates by what means,  
other than such experiences as befell *Karshish* or  
*René Gentilhomme*, the ordinary man living his  
ordinary narrow routine comes to have glimpses of  
the spiritual world. Rare though these glimpses  
are, they are enough.

So do we gain enough—yet not too much  
Acquaintance with that outer element  
Wherein there's operation (call it such !)  
Quite of another kind than we the pent  
On earth are proper to receive. Our hutch  
Lights up at the least chink : let roof be rent—  
How inmates huddle, blinded at first spasm,  
Cognizant of the sun's self through the chasm !

Finally, we may notice a curious doctrine developed  
by Bishop Blougram—and not to be attributed with-  
out much risk to the poet—that the imperfections of  
this life are blessed because they shield man from  
too dazzling a light.

Some think Creation's meant to show Him forth :  
I say it's meant to hide Him all it can,  
And that's what all the blessed evil's for.

Its use in time is to environ us,  
 Our breath, our drop of dew, with shield enough  
 Against that sight till we can bear its stress.  
 Under a vertical sun, the exposed brain  
 Less certainly would wither up at once  
 Than mind confronted with the truth of Him.

Of the nature of these glimpses that light up our hutch, Browning does not have much to say in any one poem, but two things seem fairly certain : first, they are not represented as coming through those "obstinate questionings of sense," which meant so much to Wordsworth—"fallings from us, vanishings"; secondly, they come of direct observation of our own experience and, in a way, of reasoned deductions. The love and power which men, if they take the trouble to look, will see at work around them and within them, could not exist unless as manifestations of the Divine.

✓ There is another way in which the individual is brought into contact with the Divine—or at least with the spiritual realm—which surrounds and interpenetrates the realm of the temporal and finite. We pass, as it were, from visions to visitations, for the eternal and infinite impinges upon the finite and temporal individual. And this impact takes place at, or rather coincides with, some intensely critical moment in the life of the individual, a crisis in the spiritual corresponding with a crisis in the temporal realm. One might begin by pointing to what is a caricature of this idea in *Mr. Sludge the Medium*. Mr. Sludge has partly grown up into, partly thought himself into, the belief that at each moment of his life the spiritual world interferes to guide and help him :

If I spy Charles's wain at twelve tonight,  
 It warns me, "Go, nor lose another day,

And have your hair cut, Sludge !” You laugh : and why ?  
 Were such a sign too hard for God to give ?  
 No, but Sludge seems too little for such grace.

But though this is a caricature, and though, like all caricatures, it is an exaggeration, it is an exaggeration of the less absurd idea found elsewhere. That the eternal and timeless may occupy itself with the fortunes of an individual seems ridiculous, perhaps, to anyone who does not hold the doctrine as an article of faith. But Browning thought the individual immensely important. As Chesterton points out he was constantly preoccupied with the importance of small things. One cannot take as a caricature these words of Sludge’s :

We find great things are made of little things,  
 And little things go lessening, till at last  
 Comes God behind them. Talk of mountains now ?  
 We talk of mould that heaps the mountain, mites  
 That throng the mould, and God that makes the mites.  
 The Name comes close behind a stomach cyst,  
 The simplest of creations, just a sac

. . . . .

The small becomes the dreadful and immense !

A man at certain moments in his history, moments for him of crisis, it may be, finds himself involved in some tremendous conflux of spiritual powers ; he becomes a centre round which forces unknown and unreckoned by him are working out some purpose in the eternal scheme of things. It is not always that these confluctuating forces are, as it were, interested in him as an individual or that they are subserving his purposes. That is the idea not unfamiliar in Blake—

A robin-redbreast in a cage  
 Puts all Heaven in a rage.



It is that somehow a critical moment in the individual life has synchronised or (if we must not bring in a word having associations with time) coincided with a critical moment in the history of the universe. The idea is imaged definitely enough in these lines from the *Epilogue to Dramatis Personæ* :

Take the least man of all mankind, as I ;  
Look at his head and heart, find how and why  
He differs from his fellows utterly :

Then, like me, watch when nature by degrees  
Grows alive round him, as in Arctic seas  
(They said of old) the instinctive water flees

Toward some elected point of central rock,  
As though, for its sake only, roamed the flock  
Of waves about the waste : awhile they mock

With radiance caught for the occasion,—hues  
Of blackest hell now, now such reds and blues  
As only heaven could fitly interfuse,—

The mimic monarch of the whirlpool, King  
O' the current for a minute : then they wring  
Up by the roots and oversweep the thing,

And hasten off to play again elsewhere  
The same part . . .

But the idea that the individual is mocked by these forces which play about him is by no means an essential part of the whole conception. Witness the too little known lyric of *Thamuris Marching* that comes towards the end of *Aristophanes' Apology* :

Morn had the mastery as, one by one,  
All pomps produced themselves along the tract

Thamuris marching, let no fancy slip  
Born of the fiery transport.<sup>1</sup> . . .

Therefore the morn-ray that enriched his face,  
If it gave lambent chill, took flame again  
From flush of pride. . . .

<sup>1</sup> That is, the transport of nature.

What wind arrived with all the rhythms from plain,  
Hill, dale, and that rough wildwood interspersed ?  
Compounding these to one consummate strain,

It reached him, music ; but his own outburst  
Of victory concluded the account,  
And that grew song which was mere music erst.

But the most magnificent, as it is the best known, description of this impact of the spiritual in some instant of tense emotions and crisis is in Saul—in the closing stanza of the poem. David in a moment of ecstatic rapture has foretold the supreme sacrifice of God in Christ, and in the night he makes his way home.

There were witnesses, cohorts about me, to left and to right,  
Angels, powers, the unuttered, unseen, the alive, the aware :  
I repressed, I got through them as hardly, as strugglingly there,  
As a runner beset by the populace famished for news—  
Life or death. The whole earth was awakened, hell loose  
with her crews ;  
And the stars of night beat with emotion, and tingled and shot  
Out in fire the strong pain of pent knowledge : but I fainted  
not,  
For the Hand still impelled me at once and supported, sup-  
pressed  
All the tumult, and quenched it with quiet, and holy behest  
Till the rapture was shut in itself, and the earth sank to rest.

But the whole stanza will recall itself to every reader of poetry.

In quieter tones, in a less tense emotional atmosphere, the same process re-enacts itself in *By the Fireside*. When the lover after a moment of hesitation has spoken out all his heart to his mistress—

A moment after, and hands unseen  
Were hanging the night around us fast ;  
But we knew that a bar was broken between  
Life and life : we were mixed at last  
In spite of the mental screen.

The forests had done it ; there they stood ;  
 We caught for a moment the powers at play :  
 They had mingled us so, for once and good,  
 Their work was done—we might go or stay,  
 They relapsed to their ancient mood.

How the world is made for each of us !  
 How all we perceive and know in it  
 Tends to some moment's product thus,  
 When a soul declares itself . . .

Here, then, we have the further idea—and a most important idea—that such a moment is, if not an indefeasible right of the individual, at any rate part of the reason of the existence of each individual and that this is true of all down to the humblest. Thus again we read, in *Fifine*, this utterance of Don Juan to Elvire.

Partake my confidence ! No creature's made so mean  
 But that, some way, it boasts, could we investigate,  
 Its supreme worth : fulfils, by ordinance of fate,  
 Its momentary task, gets glory all its own,  
 Tastes triumph in the world, pre-eminent, alone.  
 Where is the single grain of sand, mid millions heaped  
 Confusedly on the beach, but, did we know, has leaped  
 Or will leap, would we wait, i' the century, some once,  
 To the very throne of things ?—earth's brightest for the nonce,  
 When sunshine shall impinge on just that grain's facette  
 Which fronts him fullest, first, returns his ray with jet  
 Of promptest praise, thanks God best in creation's name !  
 (Stanza xxix.)

“ Thanks God best in creation's name,” coming in this poem of 1872, recalls *The Boy and the Angel*, which was first published in 1844 :

Morning, evening, noon and night,  
 “ Praise God ! ” sang Theocrite.

But the boy grows up and leaves his work and his song of praise :

God said in Heaven, “ Nor day nor night  
 Now brings the voice of my delight.”

And at the words the archangel Gabriel sinks to earth and takes the boy's place and sings once more the song of praise :

God said, " A praise is in Mine ear ;  
There is no doubt in it, no fear ;

So sing old worlds, and so  
New worlds that from My footstool go.

Clearer loves sound other ways :  
I miss My little human praise."

Whereupon Gabriel, leaving the cell, seeks out Theocrite in Rome and finds him there dressed in his papal robes. Gabriel calls him back once more to his cell, for weak and uncertain as the boy's song had seemed, God had missed it :

Thy voice's praise seemed weak ; it dropped—  
Creation's chorus stopped !

No allusion has yet been made to the part played in mysticism by logic or to the language of the mystic writers. Two points are worth developing here : first, that the mystic does not believe in the power of reason or dialectic to carry a man within sight and hearing of his God ; and secondly the language in which the mystic conveys his typical experience of communion with the Divine must be in a special sense symbolic.

The mystics are not committed to arguing that reason or logic is useless and contemptible. In their view the individual can and must use reason to bring him as far as it can upon his way. Now, Browning has been accused by Dean Inge of being a misologist. How far that is just, we need not be at pains to inquire. This much certainly is true, that—as he makes abundantly clear in *La Saisiaz*—

he does not believe that by the sole use of reason he can arrive at any certain truth about man's destiny in the hereafter. But if we recall a saying of the mystic Boehme (with whose writings Browning was undoubtedly acquainted), that "Love in its height is as high as God," we may see at least a mystical tendency in some lines from *Pauline* :

How should this earth's life prove my only sphere ?  
 Can I so narrow sense but that in life  
 Soul still exceeds it ? In their elements  
 My soul outsoars my reason . . . . .  
 . . . then what were love, set free,  
 Which with the object it demands would pass  
 Reason companioning the seraphim ?

With which may be compared those closing lines of *Ferishtah's Fancies* which have so often puzzled readers<sup>1</sup> :

Only, at heart's utmost joy and triumph, terror  
 Sudden turns the blood to ice : a chill wind disencharms  
 All the late enchantment ! What if all be error—  
 If the halo irised round my head were, Love, thine arms ?

There is, in Browning, much virtue in a dash.

There are a fair number of lines in Browning which in point of language recall mystical poetry. It is true that the rapt, contemplative mood is not frequent in him, but it is not absent, and its relative infrequency may make it all the more significant. The line—

Thy long blue solemn hours serenely flowing—

has already been quoted and many others included in the preceding chapters may be recalled at this point. There are yet others to which allusion may

<sup>1</sup> The verse is judiciously omitted from *Gaudeamus* (and before that from the *Balliol Song Book*), where the rest of the Epilogue appears set to music by John Farmer.

be made here. Although not many poems can be said to remain contemplative throughout, there are two at least of which that can be said—*The Guardian Angel at Fano* and *Pictor Ignotus*. And perhaps the fourth stanza of the former poem is especially interesting in the present context :

If this was ever granted, I would rest  
 My head beneath thine, while thy healing hands  
 Close covered both my eyes beside thy breast,  
 Pressing the brain which too much thought expands,  
 Back to its proper size again, and smoothing  
 Distortion down till every nerve had soothing  
 And all lay quiet, happy and suppressed.

The quietness of *Pictor Ignotus* seems in some ways akin to the "common greyness" which silvers everything, in *Andrea del Sarto*, and Browning's masterful treatment of low lights shows itself also in—

And now one after one seeks its lodging as star follows star  
 Into eve and the blue far above us,—so blue and so far !  
(Saul.)

And this evening scene from *Fifine* :

How quickly night comes ! Lo, already 'tis the land  
 Turns sea-like ; overcrept by grey, the plains expand,  
 Assume significance ; while ocean dwindles, shrinks  
 Into a pettier bound : its splash and plaint, methinks,  
 Six steps away, how both retire, as if their part  
 Were played, another force were free to prove her art,  
 Protagonist in turn !

And, far better known and better loved, the opening lines of *Love Among the Ruins* :

Where the quiet-coloured end of evening smiles  
 Miles on miles  
 On the solitary pastures where our sheep  
 Half asleep  
 Tinkle homeward through the twilight, stray or stop  
 As they crop. . . .

But these passages are by themselves evidence of little more than the occasional presence of calm moods in the general heat and turmoil of his poetry. They have nothing in them particularly suggestive of mystical thought. We must then look farther afield. And perhaps the following quotation is worth examining :

When the singers lift up their voice,  
And the trumpets made endeavour,  
Sounding, " In God rejoice ! "  
Saying, " In Him rejoice  
Whose mercy endureth for ever ! "

Then the Temple filled with a cloud,  
Even the House of the Lord ;  
Porch bent and pillar bowed :  
For the presence of the Lord,  
In the glory of His cloud,  
Had filled the House of the Lord  
(*Epilogue to Dramatis Personæ.*)

First, the movement of these lines is unlike anything that the present writer can recall in all the wide range of rhythms that Browning employed. The movement is slow without being heavy : it is strongly controlled but full of evident power. There is control and there is exaltation. More important still, there is a hint not only of the movement but of the language which we associate with mystic writings, and not only of the language but of the kind of visionary experience. That language and that kind of vision recur in a more familiar passage :

Proves she as the paved work of a sapphire  
Seen by Moses when he climbed the mountain ?  
Moses, Aaron, Nadab and Abihu  
Climbed and saw the very God, the Highest,  
Stand upon the paved work of a sapphire.  
Like the bodied heaven in his clearness





And now let us ask ourselves how much of all this is genuine mysticism. The idea of the splendour of the vision of God is familiar enough in mystical literature, but the suggestion that its very splendour may be destructive is not dwelt upon. On the other hand, it is part of the mystic way of thought to maintain that the individual must educate himself, train himself to receive the truth and pass from stage to stage of enlightenment. In the earlier stages (and few can travel beyond these in their earthly life) he will have no more than glimpses. This agrees well enough with Browning's picture of the relations between man and the eternal. The affinity between Browning and the mystics is rather less close on another side. While both agree in looking upon man's bodily limitations as a veil which prevents him from seeing the truth, they differ in this that many of the mystics proceed to argue that asceticism is necessary, otherwise the flesh will continue to be an impediment. In Browning there is no hint of an ascetic code of life except in *Easter Eve*: and we have Elizabeth Barrett Browning's authority for refusing to accept that poem as Browning's confession of faith.

We may next ask how far the notion of an impact of the eternal and infinite upon the temporal and finite agrees with mysticism. First, it must be recalled that the mystic conceives of God as an all-pervasive power, and that he aims at a complete absorption of himself into the Divine. From what has been quoted from Browning it will be clear that he too thinks of God (the eternal and the infinite) as pervading all. That one line "The spiritual life around the earthly life" suggests as much. And then again, a convulsion in the realm

of the spiritual could not produce effects within the experience of the limited and temporal individual unless these two realms were interlocked, unless they interpenetrated one another. And yet, on the whole (that is, in most passages which seem relevant), Browning's two realms, however much they interlock, seem to be able to keep themselves distinct. Lazarus has to live his life on earth and has painfully and uncertainly to adapt himself to its rules. There has been no practical use, as we might say, of his vision of God. And this would seem to be very far removed from the idea of the mystics, who would argue that knowledge of the truth of God must transform but will not distort—indeed, will perfect—life on earth. For mysticism claims to be above all things practical. Again, in the turmoil of spirit which is a part of the impact of the infinite—when the working out of the destiny of an individual holds the centre of the cosmic stage—the individual stands out distinct. Browning could not, or would not, at any point abandon his individualism. The nearest approach to any different sort of view is found in the love-poems and in certain passages of *Fifine*, in which the individual needs another individual to complete his existence. But even here there is no hint that the individuality of either is merged. The most definitely characteristic view of the individual in Browning is that which looks upon him as being necessary to reflect the glory of the Divine. Man stands upon his pin-point of space and confronts his God. Nowhere can be found a passage which speaks of the absorption of man into God—not even in *La Saisiaz* where the one point at issue is the question whether the individual can survive bodily death.

This chapter has been taken up with a study of the mystical ideas in Browning, because that discussion seemed to afford a convenient framework within which to exhibit an element in his work wholly out of harmony with that set of ideas and emotions which has generally been supposed to constitute his outlook on life—his belief, that is, in a prolonged striving and a reward deferred. That is supposed to be a central idea in Browning. The strife is prolonged to a point beyond the grave, and the reward beyond that point again, and this succession may be endless. It is true that this is a central idea or doctrine, but how can such a view of man's life and man's aims be harmonised with those other views of his which have been exhibited in this and the preceding chapter, and which can, in a sense, be summed up in this, that in each individual's life there arrives one and one only culminating point—a culminating point, just as much, in the whole scheme of things? It is in that moment, if at all, that the individual attains or fulfils; but he lived before it and will go on living after it. What, then, becomes of the endless succession of strife, of the reward endlessly deferred? This moment of crisis—this instant made eternity—cannot go on repeating itself endlessly in one existence after another. If it did, it would cease to be critical.

Two more remarks must be made at the end of this chapter. The disposition to see in Browning something at least of the mood of the contemplative or mystic may not be at all in the tradition of Browning criticism. Yet not every critic of distinction has consented to pronounce him the poet of action. "We might make ourselves spiritual by detaching ourselves from action and become perfect by the rejection of energy. It has often seemed to me that

Browning felt something of this." The writer is Oscar Wilde. And then again, though we cannot demand from any poet, not even a philosophic poet like Browning, complete consistency or a rigidly determined system of beliefs, yet in the points which have come under review here there is manifestly an incongruity which goes far beyond what we are accustomed to find in the least philosophical of poets, a root contradiction as surprising and as significant as if we were to find embedded in the middle of Hardy's work, translated into the words and rhythms of Hardy, *Prospice* or the *Epilogue to Asolando*.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE WHITE LIGHT

BROWNING'S attitude towards those who pretended to discover in his poems a key to his personal feelings and thoughts is described at some length, but in rather obscure language, by Mrs. Orr in her biography.<sup>1</sup> It seems to come to this, that he resented the attempt to read him into his poems as impertinent or irrelevant. But his protest did not, and, in the nature of things, could not, carry much weight with his critics either in his own lifetime or later. Furnivall spoke with violence of Browning's habit of hiding himself behind his characters, "whose necks," said he, "I for one should like to wring." In our own day two critics have made comments on this dramatisation. One of them describes the *dramatis personæ* as the poet's own fancy-dress ball; the other speaks of his masquerade. The problem has not been very fully discussed by his critics, and a further examination of it will yield some curious results.

Certain things which Browning himself said about his own poetry in his letters to Elizabeth Barrett appear to have been neglected by those of his biographers and critics whose works appeared after 1898, the date of the publication of the *Love Letters*. In her first letter to Robert Browning, Elizabeth Barrett had invited him to criticise her poetry and had expressed her admiration of his

<sup>1</sup> Page 309 of the revised edition, 1908.

work. To this he replies (in what was only his second letter to her):

“Your poetry must be, cannot but be, infinitely more to me than mine to you—for you *do* what I always wanted, hoped to do, and seem only now likely to do for the first time. You speak out, *you*,—I only make men and women speak—give you truth broken into prismatic hues, and fear the pure white light, even if it is in me, but I am going to try.”

And he fears that since now he must learn to do without the company of the men and women of his creation, he will find it bleak work, “this talking to the wind (for I have begun).” To this she replies: “I have been guilty of wishing that you would give the public a poem unassociated directly or indirectly with the stage, for a trial on the popular heart. I reverence the drama, but——” Then he tells her she knows nothing of him yet. “Is it true,” she answers, “that I know so ‘little’ of you? And is it true, as others say, that the productions of an artist do not partake of his real nature. . . . ? It is *not* true to my mind.” Browning will not accept this. “What I have printed gives no knowledge of me. . . . I have never begun, even, what I hope I was born to begin and end—‘R. B.—a poem.’”

He is going to “try to speak out”—to give out the “pure white light.” Indeed, he has already begun the new attempt—the attempt to produce something non-dramatic. This is all in the letters of January and February 1845. What of Browning’s work was at that time in hand? *Luria* and *A Soul’s Tragedy*—both dramas. He cannot be referring to either of them. Was something in hand then which has never reached the light of day?

Whatever the answer to that question, the important fact is that Browning had determined, apparently, before he had begun his correspondence with Elizabeth Barrett, to launch out into a new kind of poetry. Now, it might be argued that in the first ardours of love—when the contacts are being made and two souls are burning to take each other's measure—it is absurd to attach too much importance to the actual words said. These are not times when the lover sees either himself or his mistress in the right perspective. "You do not know me," cries the lover—for what lover has not? "I am a more mysterious being than you think me." There are two answers to this argument. First, it is by no means certain that Browning was at this stage in love with Elizabeth Barrett, whom he had never seen. Secondly, even if one admits that the scene was set and the lights turned on for that romantic affair, which was already in anticipation upsetting the rhythms of the poets' souls, yet allusions to this coming change—or rather to this intended change in Browning's work—keep on recurring in the correspondence long past the point at which the unconscious tendency of a lover to make himself mysterious in the eyes of the beloved is passed. It is more than a year after the first interchange of letters, it is in April of 1846, after the last of the *Bells and Pomegranates* had been published, that there occurs in one of Browning's letters this most significant passage. In it Browning is explaining that he looks upon *Luria* and *The Soul's Tragedy* as failures. They have failed, because his heart had not been in the writing of them. And how had that come about? It had come about through his meeting her: this had seemed to him like a deliverance from prison,

from his old ways of conceiving and writing, and had revealed to him a new and greater way. How could he, seeing this promise of a better kind of poetry, take interest in the final stages of producing poems which belonged to the old and limited kind ?

“ If I had not known you *so far* THESE works [i.e. *Luria* and *The Soul's Tragedy*] might have been the better—as assuredly, the greater works, I trust will follow—they would have suffered in proportion. If you take a man from prison and set him free . . . do you not probably cause a signal interruption to his previously all ingrossing occupation, and sole labour of love, of carving bone-boxes, making chains of cherry stones, and other such time-beguiling operations—does he ever take up that business with the old alacrity ? No ! But he begins ploughing, building—(castles he makes, no bone-boxes now).”

To repeat, from February 1845 to May 1846, allusions to this change that is to be in his poetry are scattered up and down the letters. It is not once or twice, but seven times, that Browning announces the rising of a quite different day, the promise of a poetry in which he will begin to express himself, “ R. B.—a poem.” Elizabeth Barrett seems to sum it all up in a letter which carries the date 26th May, 1846 :

“ Several times you have hinted to me that I made you careless for the drama, and it has puzzled me to fancy how it could be, when I understand myself so clearly the difficulty and the glory of dramatic art. Yet I am conscious of wishing you to take the other crown besides—and after having made your own creatures speak in clear human voices, to speak yourself out of that personality which God made,



and with the voice which he tuned into such power and sweetness of speech."

But what did the dawn bring? What comes next after *Luria* and *The Soul's Tragedy*? Nothing until, in 1850, *Christmas Eve* and *Easter Day*. Are these what the *Love Letters* foreshadow? At first sight there is some reason to think that this may be so. Neither poem appears to be an attempt to present a character. The speakers in them do not live in our imaginations as do Fra Lippo Lippi or even the narrator in *The Flight of the Duchess*, and there is nothing in the title to suggest a dramatic intention in either poem. But beyond this and far more important than this there is fairly strong evidence that at least *Christmas Eve*—the earlier written of the two—is based upon an interchange of ideas which we find in the *Love Letters*. It does not appear to have been remarked that the nucleus of *Christmas Eve* is contained in one of Elizabeth Barrett's letters (15th August, 1846):

"I felt unwilling, for my own part, to put on any of the liveries of the sects. The truth, as God sees it, must be something so different from these opinions about truth. . . . I believe in what is divine and floats at highest, in all these different theologies—and because the really Divine draws together souls, and tends so to a unity, I could pray anywhere and with all sorts of worshippers, from the Sistine chapel to Mr. Fox's, those kneeling and those standing. Wherever you go, in all religious societies, there is a little to revolt, and a good deal to bear with—but it is not otherwise in the world without; and, *within*, you are especially reminded that God has to be more patient than yourself after all. Still you go quickest there, where your sympathies are

least ruffled and disturbed—and I like, beyond comparison best, the simplicity of the dissenters . . . the unwritten prayer . . . the sacraments administered quickly and without charlatanism ! and the principle of a church as they hold it, *I* hold it too. . . . Well, there is enough to dissent from among the dissenters . . . you feel moreover bigotry and ignorance pressing on you on all sides, till you gasp for breath like one strangled.”

There is hardly a phrase in this which could not be paralleled by some phrase in *Christmas Eve*. Browning's reply to this must also be noted :

“ Dearest, I know your very meaning in what you said of religion, and responded to it with my whole soul—what you express now is for us both . . . those are my own feelings, my convictions beside—instinct confirmed by reason. Look at that injunction to ‘love God with all the heart and soul and strength’—and then imagine yourself bidding any faculty, that arises towards the love of him, be still ! If in a meeting house, with the blank white walls, and a simple doctrinal exposition—all the senses should turn (from where they lie neglected) to all that sunshine in the Sistine with its music and painting, which would lift them at once to Heaven,—why should you not go forth ?—to return just as quickly, when they are nourished into a luxuriance that extinguishes, what is called, Reason's pale wavering light, lamp or whatever it is—for I have got into a confusion with thinking of our convolvuluses that climb and tangle round the rose-trees—which might be lamps or tapers ! ”

Let it be considered that Browning had come to believe that this change in his poetic work, determined upon and even begun (in an experimental way

perhaps) before he met Elizabeth Barrett, was now closely bound up with their joint lives ; that *she* was to help and confirm and encourage him in this new way. The new way was the way of self-expression. And here in this particular question of religious ritual there were convictions which they shared in common—Browning says so himself. Moreover, they are convictions upon matters which both he and she considered to be of the profoundest significance and weightiest moment. What more natural, then—indeed, what more inevitable—than that such convictions should form the theme of the first of the poems in the new style ?

These arguments seem difficult to controvert. Let us ask what arguments there are on the other side. There is Browning's own declaration, repeated over and over again after his wife's death, that *all* his work is dramatic except a few of the later poems. That he could have forgotten *Christmas Eve* is impossible : that he made a mental exception of it seems equally impossible—no motive could be imagined for such an attitude. There is also Mrs. Browning's statement about *Easter Day* : " I have complained of the *asceticism* in the second part, but he said it was ' one side of the question.' Don't think he has taken to the cilix—indeed, he has not—but it is his way to *see* things as passionately as other people *feel* them. . . ." If, then, *Easter Day* is not the expression of Browning's feeling, it is difficult to think that *Christmas Eve* so entirely differed from it in character, especially as the second poem is explicitly linked up with the first. Lastly, although the passages quoted from the Love Letters are certainly the nucleus of *Christmas Eve*, there is one most important difference. Elizabeth Barrett declares (and we must remember that

Browning said he wholly and entirely shared her views): "I felt unwilling to put on any of the liveries of the sects." Browning, in his answer, protests against the view—which is the view of the dissenters, one presumes, in the little chapel in *Christmas Eve*—that *any* faculty that arises towards the love of God should be repressed. On the other hand, the speaker in *Christmas Eve*, having seen the dissenting chapel and been repelled by all that is ignorant and crude in that ritual, having also in a vision seen the Christmas Eve Mass in Saint Peter's and been present at the Göttingen professor's lecture, finds that he must make his choice—that he cannot stay indefinitely outside the enclosure of some doctrine, that he must put on the livery of some sect. Therefore he chooses the dissenters' chapel:

Meantime, in the still recurring fear  
Lest myself, at unawares, be found,  
While attacking the choice of my neighbours round,  
With none of my own made—I choose here.

Now, we know from the biographies and from Browning's own letters that, in fact, Browning did not make a choice, that he never put on the livery of any sect. So far did he go in this way, that the question was for long disputed whether he was an orthodox Christian—or a Christian in any permissible sense of the word.

The speculation may be indulged in, whether Browning, when he began to write *Christmas Eve*, had every intention of speaking out, but that something more powerful than that intention interfered and prevented the purpose being achieved, so that in the end these two poems represent not his own convictions but three points of view—with one of which,

we now know, he was more in sympathy than with the other two. Evidently, it will be of the first importance to inquire what was this something which frustrated his serious and often avowed intention. The inquiry is not easy, and it is only undertaken because it is germane to the main purpose of the present chapter, which is to exhibit in Browning's work the nature and results of a certain conflict.

A point, the significance of which will be developed later on, may here be accorded particular notice—and that is the confusion of thought in which Browning became involved in working out the simile of Reason's pale wavering light, convolvuluses, rose-trees, lamps and tapers.

Perhaps the best way in which to attack our present problem will be to recall the poems in which Browning did avowedly speak in the first person. Applying, then, the strictest tests, we find that there is only one such poem, *La Saisiaz*, which it will be worth while examining. Of the others, *One Word More* is admittedly a poem standing apart and not to be judged as characteristic; and the two poems in the *Pacchiarotto* volume, in which he is speaking in person, merely amount to the statement that his poems are not keys with which to unlock his heart. Incidentally, it is of interest that *La Saisiaz* bears a date only two years later than the warning issued in *Pacchiarotto*. Of *La Saisiaz* it may first be remarked that no one nowadays reads it for its own sake. The narrative and more purely descriptive part of it deserve, perhaps, more attention than they are likely to receive now or hereafter. Browning winds his way into his theme more rapidly and certainly than in many of his later poems. The whole thing moves easily enough up to the point at which he begins to

attack his central problem, the evidence of personal survival of bodily death.

Life thus owned unhappy, is there supplemental happiness  
Possible and probable in life to come? or must we count  
Life a curse and not a blessing, summed up in its whole amount  
Help and hindrance, joy and sorrow?

Why should I want courage here?

I will ask and have an answer—with no favour, with no fear,—  
From myself.

But from that point the course of the argument is terribly involved and difficult to a degree not exceeded in any other poem of Browning's except, perhaps, *Sordello*. The very core of the whole argumentation of the poem—the paragraph beginning

What though fancy scarce may grapple with the complex and  
immense  
—"His own world for every mortal" . . .

will only yield its secret after not one but many most careful readings. And the difficulties are not due to vague or obscure historical allusions, but to the wavering thread of thoughts carried precariously through labyrinthine parentheses and through thickets of qualifying clauses. And to what shrine does this clue lead us? To what white light which we may be glad to exchange for the "prismatic hues" of his dramatic poems? To no white light at all, and to no hue which has not been discernible in those other poems. Nearly all the main thoughts are to be found in other poems—in *Mr. Sludge the Medium*, in *Saul*, *A Death in the Desert*, *Easter Day*, *The Pope*, *Fifine at the Fair* and *Francis Furini*. All that is left peculiar to this poem is the special insistence on the idea that we can hope, and no

more than hope, for a future existence, and that to be certain of it would be in our present state no help to us, but a hindrance. If for "hope" we substitute "faith," even this idea is not so different from certain things put into the mouths of Browning's characters such as Bishop Blougram or the speaker, whoever he may be, in *Pisgah Sights*.

What, then, does *La Saisiaz* seem to tell us? Not, it may be urged, that Browning himself *never* knew when he was writing dramatically and when he was not. Nor does it prove that Browning had no personal convictions or ideas of his own—that there was no "white light" in him. Indeed, it can hardly be held to give us any help in answering the question what it was that prevented him from writing "R.B. —a poem." It does, however, suggest that when Browning attempted the non-dramatic, it took him no farther than the dramatic. *La Saisiaz*, as we said above, reflects the prismatic hues of many of the dramatic poems, but in no sense does it combine them into a white light. If it had done so, then, in spite of its obscurity, it would be one of the best known and, if not most read, then at least most quoted of his poems.

In what way, then, are we precluded from inferring that there was no white light in Browning? If it was there, why could he not unveil it for us? "White light" is a useful metaphor of Browning's own invention.<sup>1</sup> He contrasts it with the prismatic hues of his own dramatic poetry—"I only make men and women speak—give you truth broken into prismatic hues." This can only mean that the white light is the absolute truth or the whole of

<sup>1</sup> It is, indeed, not impossible that he was thinking of Shelley's phrase "the white radiance of eternity."

truth, and that again is something which, as a philosopher would say, unifies, or co-ordinates, or is a synthesis of, our whole experience. But Browning was not first and foremost a philosopher—it is important to keep that fact well in view at this point. The philosopher in his pursuit of truth employs a dialectic—an analytic logic ; his labour is ratiocination. The poet relies on intuition and on visions. He leaps or flies across the abyss while the philosopher is laboriously laying the foundations of a bridge. Or, to use a different metaphor, he has heaven opened to him in a vision. How far he succeeds in making us also see that vision depends upon two things—the adequacy of his medium and the distinctness and clarity of his own seeing eye. And so far as Browning has in any instance or in any degree failed, it has been usual to attribute failure to the inadequacy of his medium—that is, of human language. It is not impossible, however, that he did not always manage to see very clearly what it was he desired to convey. And that may have been, as he himself hints, because he could not endure to face the central incandescence of that revelation. Certainly he desired to see, and to make others see, the world irradiated with that light—the light that shone within himself. Because it shone within himself, therefore, to impart the light would be to express himself—it would be to achieve the work for which he hoped and believed he was born—" R.B.—a poem." But it was never written.

Let us notice that though the poem was never written, the unity never achieved, the white light never transferred in full radiance to his page, that is not to say that Browning had no hint at all of what the poem might be if it ever should come to be writ-



ten. The metaphor of prismatic hues breaks down at this point, therefore, since from them alone no one could gather any hint at all of the whiteness of white light. The metaphor being abandoned, we are committed, if we are to proceed with this inquiry, to nothing less formidable than a study of the psychology of the poetic act. Adequately conducted, it would extend far beyond the limits of the present book. Even narrowed down to the strictest limits compatible with any measurable result, it remains most difficult, and happens to be one in which we have very little evidence from which to work. The poets, who alone could give evidence, have been reticent. They are not, as a rule, given to an examination of their own states of mind in moments of creation. However, it so happens that Browning himself in his Preface to the spurious *Letters of Shelley*, published in 1851, has given us a hint. From his own poems (improbable as it may seem at first sight) we can deduce something, and lastly we have something in Wordsworth and in Keats which should be of use.

What Browning has to say in the Preface does very little more than confirm what was said just now—that the poet apprehends his truth in a vision. The subjective poet, says Browning, struggles towards “Not what man sees, but what God sees—the *Ideas* of Plato, seeds of creation lying burningly on the Divine Hand. . . . Not with the combination of humanity in action, but with the primal elements of humanity he has to do ; and he digs where he stands,—preferring to seek them in his own soul as the nearest reflex of that absolute Mind, according to the intuitions of which he desires to perceive and speak.” The predominating metaphors here are

of vision and light. From Wordsworth, who more than any other of the great poets was interested in the becoming of his poems, we may quote this from *The Prelude* (Book I) :

The Poet, gentle creature as he is,  
Hath, like the Lover, his unruly times ;  
His fits when he is neither sick nor well,  
Though no distress be near him but his own  
Unmanageable thoughts : his mind best pleased,  
While she as duteous as the mother dove  
Sits brooding, lives not always to that end,  
But like the innocent bird, hath goadings on  
That drive her as in trouble through the groves . . .

When, as becomes a man who would prepare  
For such an arduous work, I through myself  
Make rigorous inquisition, the report  
Is often cheering ; for I neither seem  
To lack that first great gift, the vital soul,  
Nor general Truths. . . .

The point there which calls for particular notice is the fit of restlessness which comes over the poet from time to time—a goading on (what in fashionable jargon would now be called “ an urge ”) towards some unknown goal. However well trained for his flight Wordsworth might think himself, yet when it came to choosing a theme, all went awry. For if he chose a historic theme, that might be merely because he mistook—

Proud spring-tide swellings for a regular sea,

or yet again :

Sometimes it suits me better to invent  
Some variegated story, in the main  
Lofty, but the unsubstantial structure melts  
Before the very sun that brightens it,  
Mist into air dissolving. Then a wish,  
My last and favourite aspiration, mounts

With yearning towards some philosophic song  
Of truth that cherishes our daily life

But from this awful burthen I full soon  
Take refuge and beguile myself with trust  
That mellow years will bring a riper mind  
And clearer insight. Thus my days are past  
In contradiction . . .

Humility and modest awe themselves  
Betray me, serving often for a cloak  
To a mere subtle selfishness ; that now  
Locks every function up in blank reserve,  
Now dupes me, trusting to an anxious eye  
That with intrusive restlessness beats off  
Simplicity and self presented truth.

Besides restlessness, there is something else that hampers the poet. He must come to his act of creative contemplation in a mood of complete humility, simplicity, sincerity. He must, in short, make an act of entire self-surrender. It might be a mystic who had written those lines.

In the letters of Keats we find passages that corroborate Wordsworth's account of the poetic experience. With Wordsworth's remark about intrusive restlessness compare the following passage from Colvin's *Keats* :

" In *Endymion* Keats had impeded and confused his narrative by working into it much incident and imagery symbolic of the cogitations and aspirations, the upliftings and misgivings of his own unripe spirit. Three years later, writing to Shelley from his sickbed, he contrasts the former state of his mind with his present state, saying that it was then like a scattered pack of cards but is now sorted to a pip."

And Keats knew well the "unruly times" of the poet—"After working day by day at writing, I have

a swimming in my head, and feel all the effects of a mental debauch, lowness of spirits, anxiety to go on, without the power to do so." Finally, he also believed that the poet must be passive and must make a complete surrender of himself—"It struck me what quality went to form a man of achievement, especially in literature. . . . I mean *Negative Capability*, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." And again: "Let us not go hurrying about and collecting honey, bee-like buzzing here and there for knowledge of what is to be arrived at; but let us open our leaves like a flower and be passive and receptive." Finally, just these words: "The poetical character has no self—it is everything and nothing."

We know that Browning, like Wordsworth and Keats, had his "unruly times . . . his fits when he was neither sick nor well," and that he felt those goadings on that drove him "as in trouble through the groves." Elizabeth Barrett Browning writes in one of her letters:

"Robert waits for an inclination, works by fits and starts—he can't do otherwise he says. Then reading hurts him. . . . The consequence of which is that he wants occupation and that active occupation is salvation to him with his irritable nerves, saves him from ruminating bitter cud, and from the process which I call beating his dear head against the wall till it is bruised, simply because he sees a fly there, magnified by his own two eyes almost indefinitely into some Saurian monster."

And so she was glad when he took to clay modelling and to sculpture. We know from Mrs. Orr that his

nervous excitability was such that, when he called upon a friend, he often wondered whether he would be able to make his way into the drawing-room. Perhaps here we may find a special significance in these lines from *The Guardian Angel* already quoted :

If this was ever granted, I would rest  
My head beneath thine, while thy healing hands  
Close-covered both my eyes beside thy breast,  
Pressing the brain, which too much thought expands,  
Back to its proper size again, and smoothing  
Distortion down till every nerve had soothing,  
And all lay quiet, happy and suppressed.

How soon all worldly wrong would be repaired !  
I think how I should view the earth and skies  
And sea, when once again my brow was bared  
After thy healing, with such different eyes.

Incidentally, this is one of the few earlier poems in which Browning is speaking avowedly for himself.

Turmoil and restlessness are very clearly pictured here, in those interludes, at least, between the actual times of poetic creation. But in those times themselves Browning seems to have found himself beset with even greater difficulties than Wordsworth. For difficult as was the entry into the viewless realm of poesy, once there he still found himself a prey to his own intrusive emotions. He feared the white light. At this point we may fitly recall certain passages in his poetry, already quoted in previous chapters, in which he dwells upon the danger to mortal man of having his human sight exposed to this light. Those passages occur, it will be remembered, in *Bishop Blougram's Apology*, *A Death in the Desert* and *Karshish*, and because the idea is put into the mouths of three individuals so widely different as the worldly Roman prelate, Saint John

the Divine and an Arabian medical student, it may legitimately be ascribed to Browning himself. Certainly his attempts to confront the white light were accompanied by great distress of mind, and there is a special set of associations not grasped by all readers in the beginning of the Invocation of the first part of *The Ring and the Book* :

Boldest of hearts that ever braved the sun  
Took sanctuary within the holier blue  
And sang a kindred soul out to his face. . . .<sup>1</sup>

In *Paracelsus* and in *Sordello* we find allusions to the psychology of the poetic act. Aprile, the poet in *Paracelsus*, has failed because he did not learn to temper love with wisdom. He says :

I could not curb  
My yearnings to possess at once the full  
Enjoyment, but neglected all the means  
Of realizing even the frailest joy.

And his own endeavour in poetry he sums up in these words :

Last, having thus revealed all I could love,  
Having received all love bestowed on it,  
I would die : preserving so throughout my course  
God full on me as I was full on men.

He could not bring himself to understand in time that the task being so great and the time so brief, he could only accomplish a part of his aim. But for

<sup>1</sup> It may not be fanciful to hold that we have here a clue to the meaning of a much-disputed passage in this same Invocation. The poet calls upon his Lyric Love to bless in his work.

Some whiteness which, I judge, thy face makes proud,  
Some wanness where, I think, thy foot may fall.

Is it conceivable that the whiteness and the wanness are traces in his own poetry of that white radiance which he praised in hers ?

our present purpose it is even more important to notice the restlessness and bedazzlement which possessed him in his moments of poetic vision :

Dazzled by shapes that filled its lengths with light,  
Shapes clustered there to rule thee, not obey,  
That will not wait thy summons, will not rise  
Singly, nor when thy practised eye and hand  
Can well transfer their loveliness, but crowd  
By thee for ever, bright to thy despair ? . . .

It may be argued that *Aprile* is a dramatic creation, and that we have no right to assume that Browning is picturing his own state of mind. That *Aprile* is to some extent a dramatic creation need not be disputed, but that there were common features in his experience and in Browning's is demonstrable. Compare the first of the three quotations above with this passage from a letter to Elizabeth Barrett—"But this is very foolish . . . and is part of an older—indeed primitive body of mine, which I shall never get rid of, of desiring to do nothing when I cannot do all, seeing nothing, getting, enjoying nothing, when there is no seeing and getting and enjoying *wholly*."<sup>1</sup> Moreover, there is a strong probability that a poet—especially a poet of twenty-three—in describing the psychology of another poet, whether a real poet or a figment of his own imagination, will to some extent consciously and to a greater extent unconsciously draw upon his own experiences.

In *Sordello* we have another poet who desired to get and enjoy everything at once, and who was, in a sense, the victim of his own imagination. And since the poem to which he gave his name is to yield

<sup>1</sup> Compare this passage from Keats's *Letters* : "Coleridge would let go a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half-knowledge."

much material for what follows—that is to say, for the remaining part of our inquiry into the poetic psychology of Browning—it is necessary to consider in this case also how far the poem is autobiographical and how far truly dramatic. What have Sordello and his creator in common? We have already mentioned the desire to get and to enjoy everything all at once. Next there is this, that just as in *Sordello* the spirit was allowed with its infinite power to work destructively upon the weak and limited flesh, so we know from the *Love Letters* how even in his early manhood Browning suffered in his physical constitution from the effects of high nervous tension and the excitability and restlessness of the poet's creative act. Again, in *Sordello* Browning was making a huge effort to work out a new style—almost a new poetic language. Of this there is complete evidence in the biographies. The poet Sordello had this aim also among others, and the passage in which the aim is set out contains some of the soundest criticism ever made by a poet. Not only is the criticism worth reading on that account, but also because it is a presage, in 1840, of certain doctrines which in this day critics and poets regard as characteristically modern. The new language which Sordello tried to create failed—

Because perceptions whole, like that he sought  
 To clothe, reject so pure a work of thought  
 As language : thought may take perception's place  
 But hardly co-exist in any case,  
 Being its mere presentment—of the whole  
 By parts, the simultaneous and the sole  
 By the successive and the many. Lacks  
 The crowd perception ? <sup>1</sup> painfully it tacks

<sup>1</sup> As this passage in its latter part has been found obscure by some readers, a "construe" may be justified. "The crowd painfully tacks together the thoughts into which Sordello had torn perception—he had



Thought to thought, which Sordello, needing such,  
Has rent perception into : it's to clutch  
And reconstruct—his office to diffuse,  
Destroy . . .

Elsewhere in the poem, in a curious passage in which, so to speak, Browning himself peeps out from behind the mask he is wearing, we have evidence that Sordello's conception of the function of poetry in its final or most perfect development is also Browning's conception. In this development the poet becomes "Dramatist, or, so to call him, Analyst" (to quote the heading of page 419 in Vol. III of the 1863 edition) :

"Once more I cast external things away,  
And natures composite so decompose  
That . . . Why, he writes *Sordello* !"

The inverted commas enclose Sordello's words—the rest is Browning's comment.

Other evidence of community of thought and experience between Browning and Sordello may be found in the fact that Sordello has ascribed to him many thoughts ascribed also to others of Browning's creations, which may for that reason be considered as characteristic of their creator. More valid is the identity of Sordello's thoughts with thoughts expressed in *La Saisiaz*, since in the latter poem Browning is avowedly speaking *in propria persona*. We may therefore set side by side this passage from *Sordello* (Sordello himself is speaking)—

Forget  
Vain ordinances, I have an appeal—  
I feel, am what I feel, know what I feel ;  
So much is truth to me—

been forced to do this in order to communicate the perception. The perception has to be clutched and reconstructed—that is the work of the crowd : Sordello's work is to diffuse and destroy the perception (by the mere act of communicating it)."

in which we have an expression in the briefest possible form of that subjective idealism which Professor Henry Jones recognised as the characteristic Browning metaphysic, with these lines from *La Saisiaz* :

I have questioned and am answered. Question, answer presuppose

Two points : that the thing itself which questions, answers,—is, it knows ;

Knowledge stands on my experience : all outside its narrow hem,  
Free surmise may sport and welcome ! Pleasures, pains affect  
mankind

Just as they affect myself ? Why, here's my neighbour, colour  
blind,

Eyes like mine to all appearance : " Green as grass " do I affirm ?  
" Red as grass " he contradicts me : which employs the proper  
term ?

From such evidence of community of thought between Sordello and Aprile and Browning on this and that specific point, we may guess at a wider range of community of experience—including all those ideas and emotions which in their case accompanied or constituted the poetic act.

Let us once more consider what were the special characteristics of this experience. The first feature to be noted was a certain restlessness which arose from an unsatisfied desire to seize and to enjoy at once all forms of beauty revealed to the poet. Neither Aprile nor Sordello is a being half-angel and half-bird that fronts the sun and sings a kindred soul out to his face. They are more like moths that dash at the light and dash away in contracting or expanding spirals until their wings are singed and they die—desiring the white light and yet terrified by it. In Sordello the idea of the disruptive power of spirit forcing itself on the too-weak flesh is cardinal

to the whole poem. And here it is not impossible that we have given to us, in a different metaphor, the same idea which Paracelsus embodies of the poet baffled and finally ruined in his attempt to possess the whole of beauty at once. That similarity in the conceptions can be exhibited in the following way. There is obviously a sense in which we may talk of spirit and the beauty in which spirit manifests itself as one and the same thing. In that case it is probably immaterial whether we speak of the poet's destruction being caused by the spirit trying to force itself in all the extent of its power and beauty and in one moment upon the inadequate and limited human being, or of that human being with all the inadequacies and limitations of the world of time and space in which he has his existence attempting in one moment or act to achieve and hold all beauty and power:

Aprile could not restrain himself from this vain and self-destructive aim any more than the moth can restrain itself from flying into the candle. Sordello, indeed, when it was too late, learnt the lesson of restraint, the means of sacrificing some part of the ineffable vision of power and bliss. Only love can reconcile the poet to this act of restraint and sacrifice. That is the love of humanity which Shelley—the strongest influence in Browning's time of adolescence—had made a leading theme in his poetry. We know from Browning's letters and from his biographers that to help, strengthen and comfort humanity was considered by him to be the poet's highest aim or office. He must not and cannot remain in the far region of incommunicable dreams of bliss. To help on his fellows he must be able to communicate, and if beauty in its entirety

and power is not to be communicated, he must content himself with revealing only some part of it, with lifting just a corner of the curtain. And the method which Browning chose was the method of revealing so much of this spectacle of power and beauty as could be seen at work in the minds of a character or set of characters—in their minds or their imaginary utterances.

That, then, might be one explanation of the adoption of the dramatic style or treatment—that it is a deliberate self-limitation or sacrifice by the poet. But there is another explanation towards which most of the preceding discussion of the problem in this chapter will seem to have been leading, that fear or, short of fear, trouble, turmoil, confusion may have deterred the poet from facing the light—the central and informing influence in his poetic vision. And without any attempt to derogate from Browning's motives, we may remark that when he is discussing with Elizabeth Barrett his plans for the future, his intention of speaking out, and the causes which have led him to make his work dramatic, he does not speak of a deliberate self-limitation, and he announces his intention of following her example and allowing the white light to shine out. It was not love of humanity which had hitherto caused him to veil that light—or it was only at times and in part that his motive had been this.

Let us once again for a moment divest the discussion of the metaphors of light. We have already suggested that, interpreted in the language of logic, this seeing of the white light of ultimate truth amounts to a co-ordination, a harmonisation of the poet's experience—it is the attainment of that unity which the mystic assigns as the essential character of

the Supreme Being. It was this co-ordination or unification of his experience, not, indeed, by means of the logician's dialectic but by means of the poet's intuition or vision, which seemed so difficult a task to Browning. Every movement which he made in this direction seemed to be inhibited. He stumbled and tripped. The effects show themselves in his style. He knew that *Sordello* was obscure, and he attempted to re-write it. The attempt failed, and he consoled himself by reflecting that while it was easy enough to express certain things or facts, such as "bricks and mortar," the ideas of *Sordello* came near transcending the powers of language. It might be laid down as a general rule that the obscurity of Browning is in proportion to the earnestness of his attempt to achieve, by intuition, a synthesis of his most intimate thoughts—as in the concluding parts of *Fifine at the Fair*, in *La Saisiaz*, in *Easter Day*, in *Jochanan Hakkadosh*, in *Francis Furini* and so forth. Poems like *Pacchiarotto* are difficult for a different reason—namely, that Browning is deliberately indulging in freaks of language. And *Aprile* and *Sordello* may to this extent, if no further, be projections of their creator's own self, that as in their case, so in his, strenuous concentration of the mind upon the ultimate problems of life had a definitely harmful effect upon the physical constitution.

But all this is not to deny that he had his moments, though not frequent, in which the scattered and conflicting elements of experience were co-ordinated and unified—moments, if we prefer the language, of vision. They are to be found in *Saul*, in *Rabbi Ben Ezra*, in *Abt Vogler*, in *The Last Ride Together*. Passages from his poetry have already been quoted in the two preceding chapters which sufficiently illus-

trate this achievement. In the main, however, he found himself bound to accept as a condition of his work a certain dissipation of his experience. To return to his own metaphors, he had to take light not from its source but as reflected and refracted from this object or that. He consoled himself with this knowledge,

Yet my poor spark had for its source the sun,  
even though it was rarely that he could direct upon  
that source "the great looks which compel light  
from its fount."

So far, in considering the psychology of the poetic act as exhibited in Browning, we have been concerned with showing that certain inhibitions were at work here. The question inevitably arises at this point—"What were these inhibitions?" The word "inhibition" at once suggests some theory of the kind put forward by psycho-analysts. And it seems that such theories have already been brought to bear upon Browning, inasmuch as someone has suggested that *By the Fireside* shows upon analysis clearest evidence that Browning was jealous of the success of his wife's poetry and hated her for it! One can also imagine that *Sordello* might be taken as a proof that Browning suffered from an inferiority complex.<sup>1</sup> Such methods

<sup>1</sup> To those—and they must be very few—who are at all familiar with *Sordello*, the following parallel may be interesting. Browning describes *Sordello* as puny and stunted in person and prematurely aged. His life is wasted away in dreams of unattainable perfections. He is convinced of his own greatness in everything in which a man can be great and calls upon his fellow-men to recognise and do honour to this supremacy. In Dr. Bernard Hart's *Psychology of Insanity* the following passages occur. Referring to a patient in a lunatic asylum, "a man of between thirty and forty years of age, of exceptional intelligence," he says: "It will be remembered that he was stunted and unattractive, his muscles atrophied and weak. . . ." During an attack of delirium the patient suffered from the delusion that "He was immensely strong and a gymnast of the first rank. . . . He was the greatest singer in the world, and a prodigious orator" (*The Psychology of Insanity*, by Bernard Hart, M.D. Dr. Hart is actually quoting from Jung's *Der Inhalt der Psychose*).

of dealing with the problem raised in this chapter must be left to others. To the question—of what nature was the inhibition from which Browning suffered, no satisfactory answer can be suggested by the present writer. He will travel thus far with the psycho-analysts as to say that there were powerful forces at work in the man which never succeeded in finding their appropriate outlet. And it is also not impossible that *Sordello* affords evidence that Browning was so far ahead of his age as to have come within a hair's breadth of this modern way of stating his own trouble. The idea of the spirit, timeless and out of space, destroying the poet's limited and temporal bodily constitution in an attempt to express itself comes extraordinarily close to the more modern idea of primitive instincts and desires thrusting themselves into the conscious life of a man and ruining him, body and mind. But the similarity must not be exaggerated. Browning's "soul" eternal and free is a very different notion from the modern "libido."

The time has come for summing up the argument which has run through these last four chapters. The attempt has been made to suggest that certain inconsistencies and anomalies in Browning result from a deep-seated conflict in his mind. The warring elements could be described as either the poet and the bourgeois, or as the mystic and the poet of action. The poet of action works within the realms of time and space, since these are necessary conditions of action. For him, action has value in itself; and since attainment is the death of action, he likes to think of attainment as perpetually deferred. Again, he believes in the value of the individual and the concrete, the creatures of time and space. Nothing that can happen to the individual soul is alien to

him—he is full of “eager mundane curiosity.” Over against him stands the contemplative poet whose thought wings itself beyond the realms of time and space, who can see each minute sealed with the mark of the infinite and eternal because the infinite and eternal include and swallow up the finite and the temporal. In his eyes nothing that has happened of good or beautiful can perish, because it is stored up for ever in the repository of the eternal. This assurance he has from God, revealed not by the unaided reason but in a moment of direct communication, since “God has a few of us whom he whispers in the ear.” The mood and the language are not restless and vari-coloured, but quiet and contemplative—not inert, but tense.

But the contemplative appears more rarely than the poet of action. The reason seems to be that, when Browning tried to rise above the realm of action into the realm of contemplation, the effort produced in him a turmoil and distress of a particular kind. The contemplative was eager to rise to those regions of vision, but the poet of action pulled him back. Or, to try a different picture, Browning figures like a child in a fairy story who has been promised that he shall be allowed to enter paradise on this one condition, that he will suppress his curiosity and his desires and quietly watch all that passes before him. Any movement on his part will blur and finally destroy that paradisiacal prospect. But, try as he may, he cannot suppress himself. The light of that supreme vision hurts his eyes—all the beautiful things he sees stir an irresistible desire to clutch and possess: he springs forward to grasp them—and the charm is broken—he finds himself back on earth again among his men and



women. The white light which shone for a brief instant is quenched.

In his earlier years this feeling of conflict and distress which accompanied the poetic act produced definite physical repercussions—a physical restlessness, headaches, neuralgia—which he tried to cure by vigorous exercise. In later life the conflict may have become less severe—through what causes cannot exactly be known. The shock of his wife's death might be expected to produce violent reactions. However this may be, after the finishing of *The Ring and the Book* there grew up a sort of dullness and dryness at the very core of his poetry. Another effect of the conflict would be a tendency to shut off his poetry from the rest of his life. In some measure, though probably not in great measure, there may have been a reluctance to admit strangers into a workshop which he had never quite succeeded in ordering properly. What he said himself was that his poetry was an affair between him and his God, not meaning thereby that it was a matter too sacred and intimate to be divulged to the curious vulgar, but that no one could help him in it any more than it is given to any man to save his neighbour's soul. But his account of the situation may be incomplete, and it may have been that he unconsciously shrank from reviving the restlessness and turmoil of the poetic moment.

The dissociation of his poetry would also tend to make him in outward life, as he mixed with his fellows, more a man of the world, more, even, of the bourgeois. It was difficult for Mary Gladstone to see in the Browning to whom she was introduced the author of *Abt Vogler*. We know it was difficult for Archbishop Benson too, for he writes in his diary for

3rd May, 1884: "R. Browning introduced himself to me because I had quoted him in my speech. He looks strangely to me if he does really live his poems."

It is probable that he came nearer to a reconciliation of the two sides of his nature during his married life than at any other time: and this also is the period of his greatest work. His wife fostered in him the belief that he could rise above limited and partial expressions of the truth to a steady and embracing view of the whole of truth. But to such a point he never, in fact, did rise. Every now and again he caught a glimpse of that Promised Land, but it is hardly too much to say that he died upon Pisgah. Here may be found the true reason why he cannot be classed with the very greatest of poets—with the Wordsworth of the *Immortality Ode* and *Tintern Abbey* and with the Keats of the *Odes* and the *Sonnets*. But that short of the very greatest names he is yet great—and greater than most of us take him for—that would not be very difficult to establish, even if in the process it became necessary (as it pretty certainly would) to discard large masses of that work to which nothing except a kind of excited restlessness was always driving him. And it will be necessary for anyone who might desire to do him better justice than he has yet received not to blame him for the mistakes and short-sightedness of his previous critics—mid-Victorian, late-Victorian or late-Georgian. It is not likely that any critic of to-day or to-morrow will have to struggle against the tendency to condemn him as a subverter of morals. Nor yet shall we ever again come to think of him as a mighty champion of established doctrines standing between us and ruin, though perhaps we shall recognise in the man himself, when times are pro-

pitious for such a view, a courage, nobility and constancy, a generosity and power of sympathy too rare in this present day. We may come to think of him as a poet who struggled bravely to gain an insight into the hidden soul of things—fought his way towards a light that by turns eluded and blinded him. And, meanwhile, what a world he created may some day be again revealed even to the most intelligent of us—its colour, its abundance of life, its palpitating vigour, its movement that goes glorying in its own rapidity and strength. When we look below outward things in that world, we may come to see some of our own troubles and pleasures, our own most modern doubts and certainties, faithfully mirrored or forecast with a marvellous accuracy.



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